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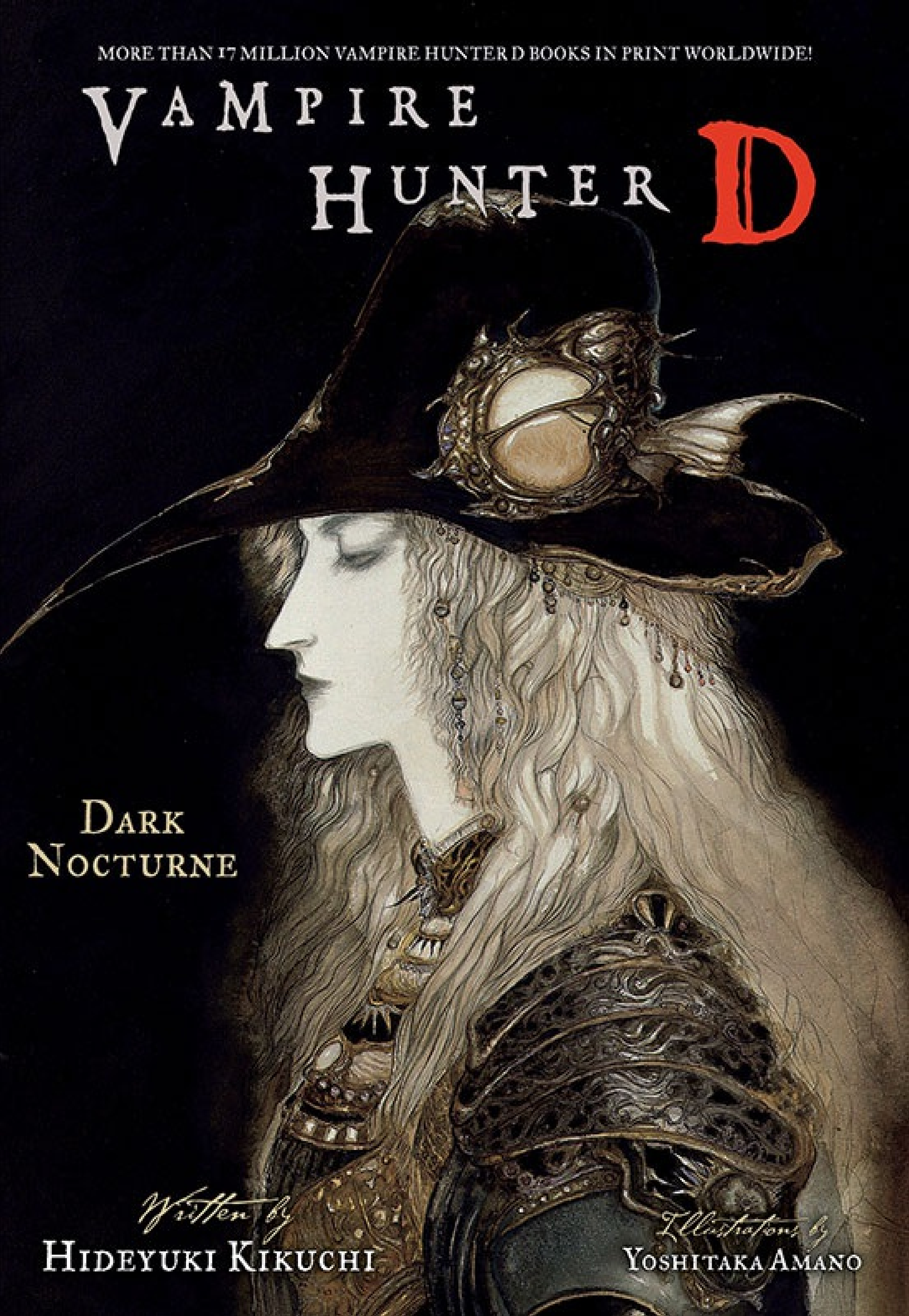

DARK NOCTURNE

Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by
YOSHITAKA AMANO

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VOLUME 10

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Dark Nocturne

SERENDIPITY IN THE BLACK FOREST

CHAPTER 1

I

Less than five minutes after thunder began to rumble in the western sky, white streaks fell, noisily battering the leaves all around the traveler. Having surmised that this might happen from the look of the sky at dusk, Ry wasn't overly concerned, but rather clucked his tongue at fate. Although it was probably no more than an evening shower, he still had to do something. It was actually to his good fortune that woods lay like black haze to either side of the narrow road. Before diving in, he'd listened intently, and the thunder had died out—at least he wouldn't have to worry about being struck by lightning.

Once he was within the tunnel formed by the interwoven branches, the fusillade of raindrops ceased as if it no longer existed. The forest was renowned as one of the largest and most thickly wooded in the area—it took less than five minutes for the blue sky to be replaced by jet black. Getting through the woods would take an hour at the very least, and after that it would be an additional hour's walk to the village of Anise.

"Guess I'll be camping," Ry said with resignation.

This wasn't a safe place, though. The forest spirits could breathe out a greenish cloud that put travelers to sleep so the monsters could steal their still-beating hearts, and werewolves, gold-eyes, and tree-dwellers were undoubtedly watching Ry from somewhere. A cursory glance at the tree trunks around him would've revealed the marks left by their fangs and claws.

However, now that he'd settled on this course of action, Ry quickly went to work. Taking a sleeping bag and pneumatic gun from the duffel bag on his back, he then put "owl eyes" into his own eyes. A pair of thin membranes that almost completely covered his eyeballs, they served as infrared filters, allowing him to discern his surroundings even in pitch blackness. In situations where building a campfire might prove deadly, travelers found such lenses indispensable.

Though the young man had intended to eat some jerky before climbing into his sleeping bag, his eyelids were suddenly on the brink of collapsing. After pressing on with a scant three hours of sleep per night over the last four or five days, it seemed he was finally paying the price. Checking that his gun was loaded and pressurized, he'd just slipped into his sleeping bag when the sandman claimed him. Still, he had remembered to at least switch on the security system connected to his sleeping bag.

No sooner had his eyes closed than the buzzer went off. Ry quickly grabbed the timepiece he wore around his neck and pulled it up for closer inspection. More than six hours had passed since he'd dropped off to sleep.

The grass was whistling. And the sound was accompanied by movement—movement from all around Ry and somewhere off deeper in the forest. A chill ran down his spine as he watched. Something was moving through the grass. The lines a number of creatures cut through the verdure were almost elegant. Then his terror faded, and even his surprise melted away softly.

A faint song trembled in the air. The voice was soft and sweet. However, it issued from the throat of a man.

That song?! Ry thought while leaping from his sleeping bag. As he walked off with only his pneumatic gun in-hand, there wasn't the least bit of uncertainty in his steps. That song, he thought. Those lyrics. That melody—

While these thoughts alone swirled in his brain, a red spider came to rest on his shoulder. Something slimy wrapped around his ankle. He didn't even seem to mind.

The face of his father appeared to him. He looked weak from his suffering, and he was reaching out from his bed with one hand. Ry thought he was going to tell him something. Though his father had always been a man of few words and he'd never preached at his son, surely he'd have at least one thought he'd like to leave the boy. But Ry soon realized he was mistaken. He saw himself reflected in his father's eyes—however, it was not him that his father saw. His dry lips trembled, his mouth yawned like a cavern, and what came from him made Ry forget all about his father's imminent demise.

There wasn't much he could remember of the lonely funeral service or the

eulogy in which the village mayor had praised the old man as a splendid cobbler. His ears still rang with that song and the one thing he'd said:

The village of Anise.

And then his father had shut his mouth and his eyes. That was all.

The day after the funeral, Ry had set out on a journey. To Anise. The seventeen-year-old never questioned the notion that the song and the final words the old man had left to this world were inseparably linked.

As he walked, he heard the sound of rain above him. Strangely enough, only his sense of time remained. A little more than five minutes had passed since he'd started walking, and the singing had long since faded. And yet his body moved naturally—and with clear conviction.

Far off to his left he heard a horse whinny. Not halting, Ry turned his face alone. He could see through the dark of night. The horse and its rider seemed to be swathed in a color deeper than the darkness. He couldn't make out the rider's face, but he wore a long coat or a cape of some kind. Ordinarily, he would've called out to the stranger immediately just to have some human companionship. But now, the thought didn't even occur to him.

Facing forward again, Ry kept walking. The rider behind him remained silent as well. After going another five or six paces, the young man became somewhat curious and turned. He didn't know exactly why he did so.

The figure had been swallowed by the darkness. Ry got the feeling that if he were to call out, he'd receive no answer, and would be devoured as well.

I must be seeing things, he thought instantly.

Only after he'd gone another ten paces did he finally see the flames. By the capering orange flares some thirty feet ahead of him, several figures were moving around. Three of them. Instinctively, Ry hid himself behind a colossal tree. Something terribly ominous seemed to be gusting at him.

One of the figures sat before the fire while the other two stood a short distance away, surveying the area. Their faces were slightly down-turned—they seemed to be scrutinizing the ground. Although Ry couldn't make out the face of the seated man, the other two both sported beards. One of them wore the

jacket and pants of a khaki-colored uniform of some sort, while his companion was covered from the neck-down by some sort of protective metal armor. Each wore a longsword on his hip.

Crouching down, the one in armor snatched something from the grass in a movement that was swifter than the eye could follow. Seeing the long black shape wriggling as the man grasped it with his right hand, Ry was horrified.

“I got one, too!” said the armored man.

“Hell, I’ve got three already,” said the one in khaki, sticking out his left hand.

A trio of similar creatures thrashed in his fist. Surely that must’ve been what’d slid so noisily through the grass. Judging by the color and size of them, they were undoubtedly wood snakes.

“Good eating tonight,” the one in armor said, first holding out the creature, and then suddenly flinging it into the air. His right hand became a blur. While the wood snake fell as a single animal, as soon as the flames touched it, it split into three pieces that vanished into the glowing blaze.

“Don’t forget these,” said the uniformed one, effortlessly doing the same to several more serpents before he turned to the man who was seated.

The flames gave off a bluish smoke.

“It sure is something, I’ll give you that,” the one in uniform remarked. “When they hear that song of yours, everything from the little rock-eaters to mountain snakes comes right over to us. With service like that, we’ll never go hungry.”

“Sure as blazes is a funny song,” the other one said. Shoving his right hand into the fire, he continued, “Oh, they’re cooking up real nice. Hot, though! You know, no matter how we try to imitate you, we can’t sing a bar. Strange, ain’t it? Wish I could’ve heard the real deal, too.”

Ry thought his heart might stop. By “the real deal” could he mean the same song his father had heard? Who’d sung it, and where? Had one of these men actually listened to it, just like his father? And were they headed someplace special?

Ry turned his gaze on the last of the three. His heart began to beat loudly

enough to reverberate within his own skull.

The flames seemed to add to his beauty. His age couldn't have differed much from Ry's own. The glow from the fire made it impossible to tell the color of his complexion, but he had golden hair. His closed eyes, his lips, the line of his nose—he was so handsome that anyone who dared to declare him as anything short of beautiful was likely to have their heart stop cold from mortification. The other two didn't look like they belonged with him at all.

Feeling a little angry, Ry thought there must be some sort of mistake.

Just then, the gorgeous young man turned to him and said, "Hey, you—come over here!"

Ry stiffened with shock.

Apparently even the rougher-looking pair had noticed him, and they wore daunting smiles as they called to him, "Yeah, come on out!"

"Have a bite with us!"

†

II

Not surprisingly, Ry hesitated. There was something dangerous about this trio.

"You know, you ain't the first person that song's dragged over," said the one in uniform. "Everyone from old men and women right down to babies just comes right on out at the sound of it. It's a weird song, all right. Come here and have a drink with us. We got us some mighty fine hooch."

Ry came to a decision. This was no time to stay in hiding.

When he stepped out with his pneumatic gun pointed toward the ground, the grins of the bearded bruisers grew even deeper.

"Well ain't you a looker! You're liable to have the she-devils chasing after you."

"Yessir, real men were made for traveling. Well, come on over already. It ain't like we're gonna eat you!"

“Before I do—could I ask you something?” said Ry. His voice was a lot steadier than he thought it’d be.

“And what would that be?” the lovely young man asked, his eyes still shut.

“Where are you guys headed?”

“Hell, we got no destination at all,” the man in uniform said, shrugging his shoulders before he hunched over. Quickly sticking his hand into the fire, he pulled out a chunk of wood snake. He brought the smoking meat up to his mouth, but it stopped right before his lips.

Ry got the feeling there’d been some odd change by the look in the eyes of the two men as they stared at him.

“Now this one looks tasty!” the uniformed man said, throwing the chunk of flesh he held down at his feet. His hand came up smoothly, and he beckoned with it, saying, “Come to daddy!”

Ry saw that his eyes gave off an unsettling red light.

I’ve gotta get out of here! he cried to himself in his head. This is just too dangerous. I need to leave, and fast!

However, his feet were stuck to the ground. His arms wouldn’t move, either. It was as if lead had been injected into his veins.

“Come on now,” said the man in uniform, beckoning once more.

Behind the boy, something moved. Passing over his head, it slid down right in front of his face. What Ry saw was a trunk about as thick as a man could reach around, and it glittered a bluish green as it reflected the flames.

It couldn’t be—this couldn’t be what he’d hidden behind after mistaking it for a tree trunk.

“Come to me,” the uniformed man said again, and then his mouth mysteriously stretched to either side. It split from ear to ear, as the saying goes. Only in his case, it went even further, opening all the way around except for about an inch at the back of his neck.

The gigantic wood snake Ry had mistaken for a tree flicked a little red tongue from its mouth. It could probably swallow the man in the uniform whole, and

this thought had the young traveler completely paralyzed. With a hiss, the tongue stretched out a good three feet to strike the face of the uniformed man.

Just then, the strangest thing occurred. The man's head from the mouth up—or to be more precise, from his upper lip—flipped backward sharply. The hinge connecting the two portions was a narrow section of skin at the back of his head less than an inch wide. Beyond rows of teeth in his disturbingly large jaws, there was no tongue or tonsils or anything; only a cavernous opening as wide as his neck. And the wood snake's head was swallowed by it. The serpent's head was three times as wide as the throat of the uniformed man, but it effortlessly slid into the opening. Naturally, his neck swelled tremendously. It wouldn't have been at all surprising if it'd split wide open. Ry stared in amazement at the man's belly, now swollen like a keg of beer.

Illusion, sorcery, or reality—while the young man was still trying to decide what to make of this, the snake kept being sucked into the man's outlandish mouth until only the tapered end of its tail remained, and even that promptly vanished. At the same time, the half of his head that'd gone backward flipped forward again, coming down on his jaw like the lid of a jar. From below his ear came the sound of bones snapping back together. And then the astounding man gave a slap to his great drum of a belly and let out a resounding belch. That alone would've been enough to give anyone goose bumps, but then ripples quickly spread across the surface of his stomach.

"You really do pack it away," the armored man said with something like admiration.

Rubbing his stomach lovingly, the man in uniform replied, "Hell, one this big is bound to come in handy some time."

"Won't he fight with the others?"

"Not to worry. I'm always careful to keep them in separate compartments."

The man's laughter sounded like something out of a nightmare to Ry.

Before it ended, the young man with blond hair said, "You asked a strange question just now, didn't you?" His voice and his manner of speaking were those of someone Ry's age. And yet, his tone also seemed to be invested with something horribly cold and mature. "The very first thing you asked wasn't our

names or what we did," he continued, "but rather our destination. Why is that?"

"No reason," Ry said, taking his eyes off the boy's gorgeous countenance. If he were to gaze at it for too long, it seemed like his mind would melt into a milky haze and he'd completely lose himself. "I was just curious," he added.

"About what? Our destination? Or about that song?" the young man said, slowly getting to his feet.

Apparently there must've been some special meaning attached to that action, because his two far rougher-looking companions backed away with paled countenances.

"That's a song you can't forget once you've heard it. Those under its spell always want to go find the singer. I heard it when I was in my mother's womb, or so I've been told. When and where did you hear it?"

Ry was just about to reply that he didn't know anything about any song, but then he suddenly became aware that an intense urge to defy the handsome young man before him had been building in his gut.

"I heard it with my own ears when I was two," said Ry. "In the village of Anise."

There was silence. A silence far more terrifying than any other change could've been.

"Is that right? I guess that figures," said the blond man. "As much as I like the song, I don't intend to go looking for the singer to hear it again. It'd probably be best if we parted company with you here."

Ry finally noticed that the young man still had his eyes shut.

"I was just thinking the same thing myself. See you around."

And with that casual expression, Ry turned his back on them. From the base of his neck to his waist was horrendously cold. The chill concentrated in the left side of his chest. It hurt. His feet moved smoothly, but the pain grew worse and worse. At the last second he thought, Here it comes . . .

That's when it happened. Off to his right, he heard a horse whinny. The pain and the chill vanished abruptly. Ry didn't turn around. He wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

The sound of the rain had died out.

When he finally reached someplace that seemed safe, Ry had a strong suspicion he'd been saved by the rider he saw earlier.

III

Located in an eastern Frontier sector, the village of Anise was bordered on all sides by rugged mountain ranges and black forests. The amount of land cultivated was barely enough to provide for the thousand villagers who lived there, but the inhabitants supplemented their income by using the waters of the Garnow River that ran along the western edge of the village to transport lumber —an activity that helped make them one of the wealthier communities in the area.

The weather controllers had almost no effect on this region, so the four seasons came and went like a goddess robed in four distinct, if simplistic, ensembles. Summer was a deep green veil that covered everything beneath the blue sky. Fall was a coat of apples and plums that swayed with sorrow-laden breezes. Winter was a white gown that hid even the school's highest spire. And now it was spring. The season when remnants of snow that feared the warmth flowed away in the clear streams, grass and flowers put forth buds, and children's feet could be heard slapping their way up and down the muddy streets.

Many people came to the village: merchants and fortune-tellers, traveling artisans and gamblers, con men and bodyguards, drifters and criminals . . . . And yet, up until last spring it had always been peaceful. But this year, it didn't look like that was going to be the case. There'd been so many travelers that day. Some were just passing through, while others had various aims and would stay a while. The peaceful village accepted them all without complaint, even though there were some the community would've done well to reject.

There were two places to stay in the village. One was a lodging house for merchants where everyone slept packed into the same room like sardines; the other was a hotel with private rooms. Ry chose the hotel. Having camped out all

the way to Anise, he still had money to spare, and he also suspected the trio might check into the merchant inn. He somewhat regretted ever having mentioned the village of Anise to them.

While the accommodations were hardly what anyone would call spectacular, the room was at least clean. It was also unpretentiously strung with high-voltage lines and various charms to ward off evil spirits and smaller monstrosities. Just as he was unpacking his baggage and considering what he should do next, a steady knock rang out and the door to his room was opened before he could even reply.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry,” said the girl.

The room seemed to brighten immediately thanks to her fearless tone and bearing. She must’ve been related to the sulky old man who’d showed Ry to this room, as her carefree demeanor didn’t fit that of a mere employee.

“I’m Amne. I work here at the hotel. I just came by to drop off something you forgot. Well, actually it’s because I heard there was someone about my age staying here and I wanted to have a peek at you. Mind if I come in?”

Once again, she didn’t bother to wait for an answer but rather strutted right in. Over her blue blouse she wore a dowdy employee jumpsuit, but like a doe, she also had an almost impudent vigor that was violently at odds with her attire.

“And just what did I forget?” Ry asked, a bit perplexed.

It wasn’t as if he hadn’t had any experience with girls back in his home village. To the contrary, his lithe build and sensitive nature made him quite popular compared to all the rough and tough country boys there. Still, none of the girls he’d known had been quite so forward.

“These. Put them in if you’re going to be outside at night.”

A pale hand opened before the boy’s chest. Taking the two little rubber items from her, Ry stared down at them.

“Ear plugs?” he said.

“That’s right. So don’t go sticking ’em up your nose by mistake. Why? Something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing. Why do I need these things?”

“I don’t rightly know,” the girl replied. “It’s just a custom. We all use them when we’re out walking at night, too.”

“Hmm.”

As he intently scrutinized the little rubber plugs, Ry wondered if he should ask Amne about the song. In a sense, it was taboo for a common traveler to ask about the history or traditions of the villages he visited. Quite naturally, in cases where the area had been under the direct control of the Nobility and their servants and the villagers had been terrorized day and night, they were loath to revisit their fearful past to the point of fanaticism.

Amne chuckled knowingly.

“What?”

“Actually, the story behind the ear plugs is no big secret or anything,” she told him. “It all goes back to the days of the Nobility. Long, long ago, there was a great big mansion on the western mountainside.”

Ry was at a loss for words.

“While they say that hundreds of Nobles lived in the mansion, one of them was a singer skilled enough to be called to the Capital to perform at the great theaters there. The story goes that on hearing the singer’s voice, not only the birds and the beasts but even the very wind and the rain would be drawn to the mansion. And I suppose you can guess what happened to the people when they went up there, can’t you?”

Ry imagined the mellifluous voice drifting out in the moonlight night after night and the gazes of the young people as they intently climbed the steep mountain road toward the mansion. For all their fear, their eyes must’ve been ablaze with delight. And while that delight burned in them, surely there was also some sadness.

Though she sounded far off in the distance, he heard Amne say, “The people all came back pale-faced, with teeth marks on their necks. And then, at night, they’d get up out of their beds and sink their fangs into the throats of their wives and children—wait, no, that’s all just one big lie.”

“A lie?”

“That’s right. Just a tale cooked up to scare the villagers and travelers. None of them did anything. Recent research has shown as much.”

“Research?” Ry said, completely thrown off balance. “They didn’t do anything? We’re talking about victims of the Nobility, aren’t we?!”

“No, I suppose they did do a little. After all, the Nobility had got to them. But apparently it was nothing like the lie I just told you. Research shows all they did was sing.”

Here was another mention of singing.

“A song . . .”

“Yes,” said Amne. “When night came, they’d slip out of the place where they were held and begin to prowl the village streets with their hands stuck in their pockets. Like this, kinda slouched forward, while they sang a certain song.”

“What kind of song was it?”

“I don’t know. All of this happened fairly far back—more than two hundred years ago. And the Nobility suddenly vanished about that time. But even now, rumors still remain that they’re actually hiding out somewhere and are going to swoop back down on us.”

“You mean to tell me no one wrote the song down?” Ry asked.

“Who’d ever do such a thing? You think we’d bother committing to paper every rotten thing the Nobility ever did to us? But now that you mention it, I heard that when rumors were going around a while back that they had come back, a traveling composer went into the mansion and jotted down the tune. I bet it’s another bullshit story.”

Given that she was working in the service industry, the girl’s use of profanity with a customer probably crossed the line. But Ry didn’t seem to notice.

“That talk about them coming back—how long ago was that?”

“Let me see . . . It’d have to be nearly twenty years, I suppose.”

In addition to the wandering composer, his father must’ve heard the song as well.

“Is there anyone who can recite the song?” asked the young man.

“Not a soul. A long time ago, you used to be able to hear it anywhere you went in these parts, because all the men and women who heard it went up to the mansion. And after they came back, the villagers who hadn’t been affected had no choice but to listen to them sing. However, they say it simply can’t be duplicated. The tune itself is simple yet beautiful, but you can’t even hum the first couple of bars. The only people who can sing it are the ones who’ve heard it themselves at the mansion. And I suppose by the same token no one could jot it down, either.”

Perhaps as a result of not inhaling for so long, Amne stopped there and took a few breaths.

“Are you sure it’s okay telling me that?” Ry said, smiling wryly all the while.

“Sure it is! When I’m at school, no one there listens to the results of my research.”

“Your research? You mean to tell me that was the theory you came up with?”

“That’s right! Why, I’m even in the ‘historical research society’ at school. Seems like you’re kind of interested, too. So, what are you here for anyway?”

“I came to hear a song, actually.”

“You’re pulling my leg!” the girl said, but she looked rather pleased. She must’ve figured he’d enjoyed her theory. “Well, not that it matters. You know,” Amne continued, “it’s past noon, so you should probably head out and get yourself some lunch. After that, I’ll show you around the village.”

“That’d be a big help, but you really don’t have to. You’ve got a lot to do here at the hotel, don’t you?”

“Not a problem,” the girl replied. “At the moment, you’re the only guest we’ve got, and the saloon downstairs doesn’t get crowded until after sundown. So, where would you like to go?”

In his heart, Ry now faced a dilemma. He couldn’t very well tell her he’d come to hear the Noble’s song or to meet the singer. But now that he knew a Noble was involved, his interest hadn’t waned in the least. To the contrary, the

knowledge had only fanned the flames of his tenacity all the more.

“Well, that’s a good question—that mansion’s probably pretty far off, right?” he said with a calculated disinterest.

The answer came instantaneously.

“Hey, it’s no problem. It’s thirty minutes by wagon. After you have lunch, we’ll still have time for a nice leisurely round-trip. We’ve even got a wagon we’re not using right now. Now, run along to the diner. You go out and take a right on the street—”

—and going straight for about two minutes, he found the sign for the diner. Right above it the words “liquor” and “dry goods” were written in large letters. In small towns and villages, it was typical to combine the general store, diner, and saloon into a single establishment. Although Ry thought they might be in there, he wound up being the only customer.

Finishing his meal of stew and bread, Ry followed the street west. The fence at the edge of the village was where he was supposed to meet Amne.

Snow still remained in a few spots along the road. Stepping into an alley he’d been told was a shortcut, Ry stopped in his tracks.

Countless gold sparkles drifted in the air–seeds of the golden snow flowers dancing on a gentle breeze. They weren’t an uncommon sight in the eastern Frontier sectors. Exceptionally heat and cold-resistant, the seeds could also withstand poor soil conditions and severe weather until one bright, sunny day in spring when they’d bloom into small golden flowers that delighted people’s eyes.

Bathed from head to toe in their golden light and seeming to almost suck up the glow, a figure in black suddenly stood there on muddy earth not yet dry from the previous night’s rain. He wore a wide-brimmed traveler’s hat and a long coat, and had an elegant longsword across his back—that was all the young man could see of him from behind. A short distance from him, a cyborg horse was toppled by the side of the road.

Ry didn’t move. There was something about the figure that was even more dangerous than the trio he’d encountered the previous night. Suddenly, it occurred to him that the rider who’d saved him in the forest might be this very

same man.

A spring breeze stroked the end of his nose. As if that harmless sign was a declaration of war, the figure in black made a leap. Looking like darkness coalesced, the figure sent flecks of light flying everywhere.

The roof of the warehouse off to his right was ten feet high. At the top of it, Ry saw a silvery flash. There were two simultaneous thuds, and a brief cry of pain rang out. Ry then watched something red fly off at an angle and strike the ground.

“We’ll meet again!” a voice he’d heard before shouted in apparent pain from somewhere in the heavens.

Ry ran out into the middle of the road. The spell over him had broken. As he was looking up, the figure in black landed right in front of him without a sound. The young traveler was once more thrown into a hopeless daze. Could a human face possibly be this beautiful? He had to wonder if he weren’t perhaps still in the forest, and all of this was a dream.

“It looks like you made it out okay,” said the man.

Although that was hardly what someone fresh from a deadly conflict would be expected to say, Ry seemed free from such concerns as he nodded. “Thanks for what you did last night,” he said with bowed head. “That character just now—was he one of them . . . ?”

“Apparently they hold a grudge. You’d do well to watch yourself.”

“I will,” the young man said, adding, “Um, I’m Ry.”

“Call me D,” said the youth in black, brilliant bits of gold dancing all around him.

THE WHITE SONG OF THE RUINED MANSE

CHAPTER 2

I

Just then, the squeak of wheels came from the far end of the street.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Amne said from the driver’s seat of the wagon as she pulled up beside the two of them, and then her eyes went wide. Her whole body, not just her cheeks, seemed to blush like a rose.

“Who’s he?” the girl asked in a tone that could only be described as childlike.

“This is Mister D. He happened to help me out last night.”

“You don’t say.”

“Where are you going?” D asked bluntly.

“There’s one of the Nobility’s mansions up ahead. Aside from that, there’s nothing to see around here,” Ry said, his tone growing more familiar.

“In that case, give me a lift.”

“Huh?” Ry said, raising his eyebrow. Anxiety had suddenly taken root in him. Although he frantically sought a reason for this, his mind encountered only an amorphous darkness.

“Be my guest,” said Amne, gesturing to the seat beside her own somewhat absent-mindedly. Not only had she readily agreed, but she seemed to be in a trance. To a girl of seventeen, D’s beauty must’ve been a drug.

“That’s your seat,” D said, tapping the boy on the shoulder.

“But I thought—”

As he pushed Ry into the seat next to hers before he could say another word, Amne showed her teeth. She was a straightforward girl.

Once D had climbed into the cargo bed in back and the vehicle’s unseemly trio of pistons began pumping up and down, the wagon started splashing through the mud puddles at a relaxed pace.

When Amne faced forward again, she let out a shriek and pointed at the ground. “That thing over there—it’s a hand!” she exclaimed.

Although the black earth didn’t make it too obvious, there certainly was a right arm taken off at the elbow lying in a pool of blood—and the piece of uniform on it was something Ry would never mistake.

After the wagon had left the village and run along the road for a while, it began to climb a slope.

“What the hell are those guys?” Ry asked D, who hadn’t said a thing since they’d set out. The boy had held his tongue because he was engulfed by D’s aura, and also because the role of the simple traveler he’d assumed required that he avoid anything related to that song.

“Itinerant warriors. All of them are quite skilled,” D replied softly.

“You mean to tell me you’ve already fought them?” Ry asked as the incredible sights of the night before skimmed through his brain. Although he knew nothing of the blond youth, he’d seen one of his compatriots slice a snake to bits with a single stroke of his hand, and watched another swallow a massive serpent. What’s more, based on the brawl a short while ago, the same individual was apparently capable of vanishing completely. These abilities put them far beyond any warriors Ry had ever known. And yet the man that was with him right now had fought them off with ease. Ry became terribly excited.

“Hey, who are these ‘guys’ you’re talking about?” said Amne as she worked the steering wheel. The girl was a veritable mass of curiosity.

“A trio that attacked me. He just told you they were warriors.”

“Well, they’re in the village, you know,” Amne said, taking no notice of the surprise on Ry’s face. “They’re staying at the merchant inn. There was a note posted on the message board that said ‘Swords for Hire.’ There’ve been bandits around the village recently, so the mayor will probably hire them. If they’re any good, that is.”

And then, in a strangely self-conscious manner, the girl asked, “And, um—what is it that you do?”

“I’m a Hunter,” D replied succinctly.

“A Hunter? You don’t mean to tell me you’re a Vampire Hunter? That is so cool!” Amne said, looking back at him.

By the age of seventeen or eighteen, most people had a better understanding of what Hunters were really like, but this girl seemed to be an exception. But, it was certainly true that the relatively rare Vampire Hunters were regarded with a reverence not afforded other monster-slaying experts.

“In that case, you could take care of those three, no sweat. Even if the Nobility have returned to the mansion, there won’t be any problem.”

“They’ve returned, you say?” asked D.

“That’s the rumor. Almost twenty years ago—” Ry began, recounting the tale exactly as Amne had told it to him. D listened without saying a word, but then he suddenly turned his gaze forward. Following his lead, Ry let a gasp escape.

Nestled in the sea of green into which the narrow road dissolved was a magnificent mansion that could almost be mistaken for a palace.

“What’s the matter, haven’t you ever seen one before?” Amne teased, but the boy didn’t even seem to notice.

The closest of the Nobility’s castles was still a hundred miles or more from Ry’s village—no small distance. While he’d heard vile tales about them before bedtime, he’d never actually seen a real Noble. What’s more, there was the matter of the song.

“Are there any victims of the Nobility left in your village?” asked D.

“Don’t make me laugh! They were all disposed of. I’m sure it’s the same everywhere.”

“That’s not necessarily the case. When someone didn’t completely become one of them, there have been cases where their family took pity on them and kept them hidden and locked in the basement.

“That’s revolting! In that case, what are they supposed to do after that? Victims who’ve progressed to a certain degree toward becoming Nobility stop aging. If their family died out, would those things just be left living alone in the basement till the end of time? I wonder what they’d do about food? Would

hunger torment them for all eternity?”

“You just say whatever the hell you feel like, don’t you?” Ry said, his voice laden with anger. “You can put down the Nobility all you like. But their victims are human, just like us. You could choose your words a little better.”

“What are you putting on airs for all of a sudden?! If you’ve been bitten once by the Nobility, you’re one of them, and that’s all there is to it. You’re such a softy.”

Ry was disgusted. Was that all this girl who’d been so worked up about the whatever-it-was club at school had to say? She was far too callous.

“And you’ve spent too much time with your nose in books!”

“Oh, is that a fact?!”

After that, no one said anything and the three of them merely listened to the rumble of the engine.

The front gates grew closer.

“Stop here,” said D.

“Why? Aren’t we going into the courtyard?”

“I heard a horse whinnying. It seems someone else has gotten here first.”

Ry and Amne looked at each other.

“You suppose it’s those guys?” asked the boy.

The wagon stopped. D got out first, saying, “You’d better stay put.”

“But—” Ry protested.

“Those men are after you.”

“Oh, great! You mean to tell me there are people on your trail?”

“Put a cork in it.”

While the two of them were arguing, D raced over to the gate with his coat streaming out behind him. Pushing the rusted iron panel open, he entered the courtyard.

The garden where women in white dresses and men in black capes had come

long ago to admire the elegance of the night was now laid bare to the light of the sun, leaving the ravages of time painfully displayed. Various spots around the white mansion that'd been destroyed must've been the work of villagers who'd slipped in after the Nobility had left.

D entered the vestibule. Its large door had collapsed.

"Welcome," a youthful voice called down to him.

Quietly looking up, he found a golden light that danced on the landing directly ahead of him, where the two staircases leading to the second floor converged. Blond hair. The cold and youthful face it framed played host to a refined smile.

"Forgive our lack of manners last night. Seeing that you've made it out here, I take it Kurt must've been wounded." The young man hadn't said his compatriot had been killed. His assessment was right on the mark.

"You got here fast," said D.

"I flew. Oh, forgive me for not introducing myself earlier. I'm Price."

"D."

The way the young man's changed expression was a sight to see. His face suddenly filled with fear and regret—but he grinned then nevertheless. "The Vampire Hunter 'D.' I should've realized as much the moment I first gazed on your beauty. It's an honor to meet you."

"I've heard talk about you as well," D said emotionlessly.

"Oh, really? What kind of things?"

"That you'd sign on for killing women and children so long as there was a paycheck in it for you. You're a real piece of work."

Price was at a loss for an answer. Ordinarily those words were a condemnation, but when they came from D's lips, they could also be taken as a compliment.

“What brings you out here, anyway?” asked the young man.

“How about you?”

“I am loath to reply, but since it’s you that’s asking—I’m on a journey to find the origin of that song.”

“You heard it in your mother’s womb. So, why have you suddenly come out here?”

“Well, actually—” Price began, hemming and hawing. Perhaps he’d never given the matter any thought. “First, kindly answer my question. Why would the world’s greatest living Vampire Hunter call on ruins the Nobility have long since abandoned?”

One above, the other below—and between the two dashing figures there flowed an ineffable air of the uncanny.

“There is something I should make clear,” said Price. “We’ve already found an employer. Kindly keep in mind that our actions in the village are backed by a figure of no small standing.”

“And this figure wants me defeated?” D asked softly.

Price’s expression stiffened.

“Twenty years ago, the Nobles that departed this place returned. A number of people heard that song, and now their children have come back here at the very same time. Why is that?” said the Hunter, the black depths of his eyes transfixing Price.

A pair of blue eyes counterattacked. It was almost as if two exquisite sculptures had suddenly appeared in a hall previously filled by naught but desolation.

II

“Why is that?” D said, his voice echoing off into the vast stillness.

A bead of sweat rolled down Price’s cheek.

“Answer me.”

As D’s command shouted out like a coup de grace, a base growl rolled across the floor from the doorway to the Hunter’s rear.

“Bijima?” Price said, his face flushing with joy. Apparently free of D’s spell now, he used one hand to rub at his eyes.

“Looks like even you’re not too good at handling Vampire Hunter ‘D.’ That’s a little sad.”

If the ten-foot-tall four-legged creature with three heads in the doorway had said that, it would’ve been more ridiculous than astonishing. From the tops of its heads to the tip of its tail, the armored beast’s entire body was covered with glossy black steel. And behind it stood the man in uniform.

“Make one move and he’ll chomp down on you, D. And I’ll snap the necks of these two to boot.”

His arms pulled in tighter, and within them, the faces of Ry and Amne contorted without so much as a cry.

“You see, you can’t go head-to-head with a Vampire Hunter of your notoriety without getting some leverage. So go ahead and answer Price’s question, D.” The man in the uniform—Bijima—bared his yellowed teeth. “It’s only fair to warn you that this beastie was a watchdog left behind by the southern Nobility. The alloy armor covering its body could stand up to a direct hit from a small nuclear device. And look what else it can do.”

Molten swirls of color shot by D on either side. The dog had spat them up. Flames that could melt iron hit the floor sixty feet away, spreading in a carpet of spiteful hues.

“Can you cut your way through fire, D? Now, if you value your life and those of your two friends, you’d better come clean with us.”

“Now there are two,” D said as flames flickered across his face, “who need to answer.”

Bijima’s complexion grew even paler than Price’s. He realized that he and Price were the two to whom the Hunter referred.

“Kill him!” he shouted, but perhaps that was too rash for a man who thought he held the trump card.

At the same time the beast’s trio of heads lunged forward, they also spat flames that the Vampire Hunter dashed straight into.

“What the hell?!” Bijima exclaimed, forgetting all about breaking the necks of his two prisoners. Every gout of flame directed at D had been split down the middle, allowing him to pass. The instant the villain realized the ungodly skill behind the blade he faced, he put all his crushing strength into his arms. But his captives didn’t move. Looking down in disbelief, he found sticks of unfinished wood running through both his elbows.

“Waaaagh!” he bellowed, his wail as regrettable as it was disgraceful. But naturally his cry did nothing to stay D’s naked steel.

With a resounding crunch the beast’s three heads were severed, but D then halted right in front of the body as it spouted fountains of black blood. Even the decapitated torso seemed to lose itself in the sound of the song.

The faces of all present—including D himself—turned in a heartbeat toward a little door to the rear of the hall. Seeing Price spring into action, Ry started to run as well. Bijima had already released his prisoners and leapt out into the courtyard.

One of D’s hands stopped Ry. Taking a quick glance in the direction where Bijima had made his escape, the Hunter then dashed for the door a second later. He was only a few paces from it when it slammed shut. There was the sound of a lock being thrown.

Without stopping, D hit the door shoulder-first. Though it creaked, it didn’t open—in this mansion of the Nobility, the doors were made with Nobles in mind. Finally, on the third try, the lock gave way. Beyond it lay a corridor.

About fifteen feet from them, Price was frozen in his tracks. He was facing D. And he seemed exhausted.

“Did you hear it?”

“I heard it,” D replied.

“It was a beautiful tune. Aside from the voice, that is.”

The singer definitely had been a young man.

“Do you think it was a Noble? No, it couldn’t possibly be. No Noble could ever have a voice like that. Who was it, then?”

As Price continued to talk, D checked all around them for any sign of another presence, but he soon turned his back to the warrior. Ry and Amne were standing in the doorway.

“Is he gone?”

The Hunter nodded faintly in reply to Ry’s query.

“Everyone who sings that song goes. Even my father’s gone.”

“Let’s leave,” said D.

Price watched in silence as the three figures vanished into the hall. Ever so sadly he watched, as if he were the last living creature on earth.

III

After parting company with Amne, who seemed to want to ask him something but was strangely unable to do so, Ry holed up in his hotel room. That singing voice still rang in his head. Was that voice the same one that his father and Price had heard? No, he thought it couldn’t be. But he didn’t know why. He’d asked D about it, but hadn’t gotten any answer.

Having fretted until sundown, Ry finally went to the room beside his to see D. Upon returning to the village, the Hunter had also checked into the hotel.

Never even bothering to take off his coat, the figure in black was seated in a chair by the window. The village was growing a deepening blue. A strange sense of reality askew enveloped the boy, for he’d just wondered if perhaps it hadn’t been this Hunter that’d sung the song. He of all people could make sprites and moonlight captives of a single-minded sentiment merely by singing the poignant nocturne to himself.

“What is it?” asked D.

“Nothing much. I just wanted to talk to you a little.”

“Then take a seat.” D then asked, “Why have you come here?”

To be honest, Ry was elated that the Hunter was interested in him. Once he’d finished telling D the story about his father, he said, “I wondered what it’d be like to meet the person that sang that song. If at all possible, I’d like to hear it right from their lips. That’s all I want. Once that’s done, I’ll go home.”

He continued, “But I wonder what kind of Noble it was. The thought of one of them luring people there with just a song . . . And the people who’d been bitten didn’t attack their own families, but merely wandered the night singing the song. You ever hear of a Noble like that before?”

“No,” D replied as he continued to look out the window. Out in a world shuttered by darkness, lamps had begun to shine here and there. “There are various kinds of Nobles. Perhaps there are Nobles who aren’t Nobility at all.”

“You can’t be serious.”

At that moment, a knock sounded.

Ry stood at the ready—he thought it might be the same trio that was after him. But he was incorrect. The caller was a servant from the mayor’s home. He explained that his employer had learned that the famed Vampire Hunter “D” had called on the village and was most eager to discuss some work with him. He also said his employer wanted the Hunter to come right away. D agreed. The servant added that the other young man was also to accompany them, and that they needed to discuss the matter of the nocturne. Although Ry got no answer when he asked how the mayor knew about him, he decided to comply.

As they headed east toward the estate, Ry rode in the coach that’d been sent for them while D took his newly purchased cyborg horse.

In an opulent living room befitting the head of a wealthy village, the mayor waited with three men: Price, Bijima with his pair of bandaged elbows, and Kurt with an arm missing. Though Ry was tense, D went impassively to the seat that had been indicated. Heavy curtains were drawn across the windows.

“Welcome, Vampire Hunter ‘D.’ I am Mayor Cobier,” the silver-haired woman said, showing them a forceful smile. “And these three, as you can see, are in my employ. For, you see, a certain objectionable rumor has been brought to my attention.”

“And that is?” D asked, ignoring the trio that stood behind Mayor Cobier as if they didn’t even exist.

“That the Nobles have returned once more.”

“Did you say ‘once more’?”

“Yes. They came back on one other occasion, nearly twenty years ago. At that point using ear plugs and keeping our doors locked had become the norm, so there were no victims. I hope this time we can say the same. I should like to have you join forces with these three and destroy the Nobility.”

Stealing a glance at the horrified trio, Ry averted his gaze after catching a look of egregious resentment from Kurt.

“Needless to say, I’ll pay you whatever compensation you desire, and you shall be in charge of the group.”

Now Ry was staring at the trio again in amazement. Bijima and Kurt looked dejected, and Price’s exquisite countenance was etched with an ironic smile, but none of the three said a single word. They must’ve been promised a considerable sum to agree to such conditions. However, there was no chance of the Hunter ever accepting the offer.

“Very well,” said D. “But you’re to leave the entire matter to me. You cannot countermand me.”

“Understood,” the mayor replied. Clearly this woman was quite competent at running this village, and with good reason.

“So, what would you have the three of us do, boss?” Price asked, his words mixed with a bitter grin.

Walking over to the window, D pushed aside the curtains and looked out into the darkness, in the direction of the mansion.

“Next, we’ll be heading up to the mansion. Bijima, you take the boy back to

the hotel.”

“Pardon my saying so, but I went over every inch of that place,” said Price. “I didn’t find anyone.”

“Apparently they can’t be seen,” D said without ever taking his eyes off the window. Perhaps sensing something, he pulled the curtain back as Price was about to walk over.

It was the mayor that gasped.

What Ry felt was terror and a strange sense of relief. It seemed that his long journey hadn’t been a waste.

The lights of various villages were scattered in the distance—in one spot on the towering mountain whose outline only added to the darkness, a little light winked on, glowing to announce to all the world the return of the fiends.

After Price and Kurt left with D, Ry stayed on at the mayor’s house. He’d been told it would be safer than the hotel, and that the mayor didn’t feel right about him riding back after dark. Bijima told him he should do it, too, before he made himself scarce.

“I heard about you from those three men. They say you were traveling all alone. What a brave young man you must be.”

“I guess.”

“Why have you come to our village? Are you drawn by the song, just like Price?”

“That’s right.” And then, in response to her questions, Ry told her all about his father and the song.

Staring coldly at the curtains her servants had drawn, the mayor said, “That song is the devil’s work!”

It almost sounded as if she were talking to herself.

“The Nobility made the song to lure the villagers. Those they called never came home again. It’s a cursed melody that should never pass anyone’s lips. And that’s why it’s so beautiful.”

“But I heard everybody that was called came back.”

The mayor cackled—Ry was actually a little surprised that this woman could laugh.

“The girl at the hotel fed you that malarkey, did she? You see, all the victims of the Nobility become their servants. Do you know of any exceptions?”

“No.”

“They all went off. Even my own child.”

Lightning knifed through Ry’s spine. If this woman who seemed to be around sixty had lost a child, then the Nobility’s return twenty years earlier was more than just a legend.

“I was so busy with my housework that I completely ignored my child. I paid no attention to the angry threats about going off to the Nobles’ mansion. And ever since, I’ve lived alone.”

Somewhere, a clock chimed.

Patting her silvery mane, the mayor got to her feet.

“Join me for supper,” she said. “And once that’s finished, it’ll be time for you to go to bed.”

Even after they dismounted at the gates, the light didn’t go out. It burned at the far end of the mansion’s right wing—in a lone room.

“There’s no way they wouldn’t have noticed us. And whoever it is, they must underestimate us,” Price said sarcastically.

Although travelers might visit a Noble manor, no one would ever stay in one overnight. In any case, the occupant showed considerable courage.

“Circle around to the garden. I’ll go in through the door.”

“Check.”

Taking the silent and sullen Kurt with him, Price dashed off.

Once he saw the two men disappear, D stepped into the mansion. Casually

making his way through the hall, he headed toward the corridor at the back. Turning at the end of it, he moved into the right wing. His gait was steady as always, and both his arms hung by his sides. Presently he came to a halt. Before him loomed an elaborately carved door. When his black glove pushed against it, it opened without the slightest resistance.

D silently stood in the flickering light. The canopied bed, the writing desk set by the bay window, the chic ebony cabinet, and the white lace curtains swaying by the windows were covered with a white dust. They were clearly the trappings of a woman's room. D walked over to the little table with the silver candelabra resting on it—the source of the light. Someone must've made use of the things that'd been left here. The blue candles had burned down halfway in their holders.

A trace of the room's occupant lingered in the air. An almost imperceptible chill—probably from the breath of a Noble.

D approached the bed. Taking two steps, his body suddenly became a blur.

Sinking into the ceiling with a mellifluous sound was a steel arrow.

With a single bound, D was back at the doorway. There was no one out in the corridor. The wall directly opposite the door now had three needles of unfinished wood sticking from it. All of them had been hurled by D just as his longsword swiped out to deflect the deadly missile. And none of them were missing. His opponent was worthy of kudos.

"Not too shabby," said a hoarse voice. It came from D's left hand, which had taken hold of a needle. After pulling all three out of the wall, D turned around. Perhaps the singer had been waiting for the night.

How many people knew what the word "nocturne" meant? It was a song that loved the night. A song for those awaiting a lover in the darkness.

The hem of the Hunter's coat flashed out. A wind had blown from the corridor and into the room. D advanced without a word.

Light filled the space. Ignoring the very laws of physics, moonlight shone in through windows on three walls to focus on a single spot. And there was the singer.

You might say it was the instinct of a Frontier creature that roused Ry from his sleep. As soon as his eyes were open, they were drawn to just one thing. The doorknob. It was moving. Slowly turning. Even though the boy was sure he'd locked it.

Ry heard the creak of the hinges.

The figure that crept in crossed the floor and came all the way over to the side of the bed without the boy's being able to move a muscle. Ry was too busy listening to the song. It issued from the mouth of the shadowy figure that was slowly leaning over him.

MELODY ON A WHITE MOONLIT NIGHT

CHAPTER 3

I

The moonlight passed right through the woman and bleached the floor. A number of the flecks of light glittered on her body, accenting the flow of her long hair and the pleats of her dress and making her look like something from beyond the grave.

“When did you return?” D inquired softly.

I never went anywhere at all, she replied, her voice resounding in D’s head. I’ve been here all along. The only reason none of you noticed me was because I didn’t sing.

“And that song—who taught it to you?”

I don’t recall, she answered immediately. There’s little point in asking who taught me it, or when. All I know is how to sing.

“Then let me ask you this—who decided when you’d sing? And how and why were the selections made?”

The woman turned to D without a sound—not even the air stirred. Perhaps both the woman and the room were mere illusions. Maybe even D himself was one.

What brings you here, you gorgeous man? Even my song will be no more than noise in your presence. I feel I may even forget how to sing.

“That song isn’t to be sung,” said D. At some point he’d taken a place by the woman’s side. “It’s a song that a certain man had his musicians compose, and he made a certain woman sing it. The effect it had wasn’t what the man intended. And that’s why it can’t be allowed to remain in this world.”

The woman’s sparkling eyes reflected D’s image. Through her dreamlike form, the window to her rear and even the very moonlight was visible.

Are you . . . ? the woman began, her thoughts swimming. Your face . . . Your

bearing . . . So like him . . . You couldn’t be . . .

Without a single wasted motion, D drew his blade and slashed through the woman’s torso. The silvery flash left a trail through her body like the Milky Way, but it disappeared almost instantly.

D didn’t launch a second attack—the first had merely been a tentative strike. Although the woman existed, she wasn’t real. To cut an illusion given shape, even D would need a very special sword technique.

The woman’s outline rapidly grew hazy, like a dream as its dreamer is about to awaken.

I’m always here. Come anytime you like.

From behind D came the rasp of a sword being unsheathed. A few seconds later, another sound entered the room. It was Price and Kurt.

“Where’s the singer?” Price asked as he gingerly surveyed the room. The handsome young man must’ve heard her as well.

“She’s right there,” D replied, gazing at a spot over by the windows.

“I don’t see a damn thing,” Kurt spat venomously. “Sheesh, you let her get away. And after all the talk I’ve heard about you being the best Vampire Hunter on the Frontier. She never would’ve escaped if I’d been here, I tell you!”

His caustic remarks sprang from hard feelings over the arm he’d lost.

“I’m a tad disappointed in you,” Price said in a sarcastic tone.

There was a dull thud as the steel arrow fell at his feet.

“What’s this?”

“Which one of you does that belong to?” asked the Hunter.

“This thing? What are you trying to get at?”

“That arrow was fired at me earlier.”

As Price’s gaze fell upon him, Kurt lowered his eyes.

“I thought I told you not to.”

“Hell, an arrow like that could’ve come from anywhere,” Kurt retorted in an

unsteady tone.

“We split up in the garden, but I didn’t think he was going off to take a shot at you. You have my apologies,” Price said before making an obsequious bow to D. “It won’t happen again. I ask your forgiveness.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me! There’s no reason you should be bowing your head to this joker. If I get half a chance, I’ll kill him for sure,” the man in the military garb blustered.

But an icy tone informed him, “You’ll never get another opportunity.”

It sounded as if it could freeze the very moonlight.

“You dirty—” Kurt started to say as his left hand reached for his chest. Arrows that’d been tucked in his uniform jutted out, becoming flashes of black concentrated on D. But all of them seemed to be batted away by a single streak of white light. The man’s left hand was about to unleash another assault when a naked blade made a diagonal cut through him. Sliced from the left shoulder to the right hip, the upper portion of Kurt’s body didn’t begin to smoothly slide off the lower half until after D’s blade was back in its sheath.

“Are you going to bury him?”

Freed from his paralysis by the Hunter’s question, Price could finally move again. “You—you’re not much for forgiveness, are you?” he stammered.

Though his remark invited side-splitting laughter, it rang with the brutal reality of what had just transpired. He hadn’t been able to so much as lift a finger while his comrade was slaughtered before his very eyes.

“You heard the woman’s song, correct?” D said as he faced the windows.

Hers had been a modest tone, and it didn’t seem the least bit likely to have carried all the way down to the garden.

“If you could hear it out there, it may have reached the village, too. Let’s head back.”

Even after the graceful figure in black had slipped through the doorway, Price had to stand there a little while longer before the spell over him was completely broken.

Shaken firmly, Ry reflexively tried to sit up. It took a few seconds for his retinas to confirm the presence of D and the mayor.

“What is it?” the boy asked.

In lieu of a reply, a black glove reached out to grab his chin, turning his face to the left and the right. Oddly enough, the treatment didn’t feel at all rough to him.

“There’s not a mark on him, is there?” the mayor said with apparent relief.

“What’s going on?”

A man so handsome to his sleeping eyes he had to wonder if he was still dreaming asked, “Did you hear the song?”

Narrowing his eyes, Ry traced back through his memories. “Nope. Although I was asleep, so I really don’t know.” But he couldn’t be sure if his answer was correct. To cover this, he asked ill-temperedly, “What the hell time is it anyway?”

“It’s the middle of the night. Go back to sleep.”

With these words, D returned to the living room. Price and Bijima were waiting there, although it wouldn’t have been at all surprising if they’d been on edge, the atmosphere was painfully commonplace.

“You must really be something to take ol’ Kurt out with one shot,” Bijima said, sounding more excited than anything. “Now I get a bigger share of what the mayor’s paying us. Thanks.”

“He didn’t hear the song,” Price said as his eyes knifed his compatriot.

“When the Noble sings, there’s some sort of selection,” Mayor Cobier said, pawing at her silver hair. “In the legends from two centuries ago, the only ones entranced by the song were young people around twenty years of age. The same goes for twenty years ago—”

“A Noble that only wants the blood of kids, eh? That’s a new one,” Bijima remarked.

Eyeing the door to Ry’s bedroom, the mayor continued, “However, that boy

didn’t hear it. If there’d been anything else out of the ordinary, I’d have long since been notified about it.”

“Perhaps he doesn’t remember.”

Three pairs of eyes focused on D. The hue of surprise melted into infatuation, as was always the case.

Not surprisingly, Price was the first one to return to his senses. “You mean the boy? But if he didn’t go out to the mansion and there’s no trace of the accursed kiss left on him, I don’t see what the problem is.”

The mayor nodded her agreement.

“Actually, nothing strange happened to me, either. I think the song last night didn’t have the power of the Nobility behind it.”

D’s eyes swallowed Price. “Perhaps only one person was chosen.”

“Chosen?”

The mayor and Price looked at each other. The eyes of one of them filled with a horribly keen light as they bored through the young man in black.

“There’s something I’d like to ask, too,” said Price.

D was silent.

“What brings you to this village? Up until now, I thought it was merely a coincidence, but do you know something?”

“The singer is in the mansion,” said D. “That’s the only person who knows everything. We should get some rest.”

II

“Why are you so out of it?”

At this unexpected remark, Ry turned sideways. Amne was there. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she wore a pair of thin slacks. The rather generous swell in her yellow blouse made the boy a bit nervous.

“Since you never came back, I just came to check up on you. Whether you use it or not, you’re still gonna have to pay for the room, you know.”

“I know that,” Ry said, leaning against a nearby tree trunk while his eyes fell on a glittering band some fifteen or twenty feet away.

Flowing from a mountain spring about twelve miles to the north, the river helped give the scene a grim majesty. The spray sent up by a collection of boulders allowed pure white blossoms to bloom, and countless rainbows sprang to life in the sunlit gaps between flowers. As proof that these were no ordinary trick of the light, when the silvery fish shot from the surface of the river and broke through them, their tiny mouths pulled multicolored bits from them, and the rainbows were clearly being whittled down. The roar of the river was reminiscent of a rumbling in the ground.

They were by the road that ran from the mayor’s house into the heart of town. There wasn’t any sign of travelers along the riverbanks.

“You’re not in very good spirits, are you? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, really.”

“It’s not nothing, I’d say. You seemed like a completely different person yesterday. Are you really such a brooder?”

“That’s a hell of a thing to say to one of your guests!”

“Okay, okay,” Amne said, pointing to the electric-powered wagon that was parked a short distance from them. “In that case, allow me to show our guest some hospitality. I’ll give you a guided tour of the Noble remains around the village based on a map drawn up by the Anise Historical Research Society.”

“Not interested,” Ry replied, pulling away.

“What’s this? Yesterday you were overjoyed to go for a ride. Oh, I get it! Now that there’s been a little excitement, you’ve lost your nerve, haven’t you?”

“That’s right.”

“Coward.”

“I’m just a plain old traveler. I don’t have any interest in the damned Nobility.”

“That’s a lie. The interest you showed yesterday was certainly real enough. So, off you go to stay at the mayor’s house when I’m not looking—looks like you’ve got plenty of secrets.”

“You’ve got me all wrong.”

“Whatever. Come with me. After all, you’ll get to see the sights for free. It couldn’t hurt to look. And I’ll throw in something special to sweeten the deal.”

“Oh? What’s that?” the boy asked with no apparent interest.

To be honest, Ry was a bit anxious. In answer to D’s question, he’d said there was nothing out of the ordinary, but in truth he couldn’t remember anything about the previous night. His memories ended with him climbing into bed. It was unusual for Ry, who always stayed quite alert until the second he fell asleep. What’s more, he couldn’t shake the feeling he was being followed by someone. When he’d woken up that morning, D, the two warriors, and even the mayor had already left, but one of the mayor’s servants had conveyed her orders that he stay at her house from that night on. He’d run into Amne as he was going off to collect his things and bring them back. One of those four was probably following him. Most likely it was Bijima, though he’d have to be doing a pretty sloppy job of it for Ry to notice him.

“I’ll tell you what the bonus is if you get in the wagon,” said the girl. “I don’t want anyone else to hear.”

This would probably be a good way to lose his unseen pursuer.

“Okay. I’ll go with you,” Ry said reluctantly. “But in return, you’ve gotta forget about the charge for my room.”

“Hey, that’s a whole different matter!”

“In that case, count me out.”

“Okay, I get the point. You’re a real tightwad, aren’t you?” Amne said irritably, although his cheapness was only natural.

The wagon carried them south for about a mile and a quarter before it stopped. They were out in a field quite some distance from the main road. Though it looked as if flames of green were blazing across the grasslands as far as

the eye could see, in spots here and there chunks of black stuck out like a sore thumb. These were clearly the remains of a massive structure.

“On this spot stood one of the Nobility’s research centers or factories. Lately, though, the opinion that it was another kind of facility has been gaining strength.”

“What kind of facility?”

“A concert hall!”

“You don’t say,” Ry replied as he looked up at the heavens. White clouds frolicked like kittens in the blue sky. “And just who’s voiced this theory?”

“Yours truly.”

“Give me a break!” the boy snorted.

“No matter whose theory it is, what’s true is true!”

At her passionate reply, Ry realized she had a point.

“Come this way.”

Doing as she said, Ry got out of the wagon and advanced across the grass to the largest of the ruins.

“Here it is!” Amne declared, standing there with all the excitement and emotion befitting a girl her age. But ahead of her, all Ry could make out was assorted piles of rubble from some unknown source.

“And where’s this supposed concert hall?”

“You can’t tell just from looking at this. The basis of my theory is this way.”

It took a good five minutes to circle around behind the massive stone ruins.

“But how could anything this big and solid fall apart? It looks like it should’ve lasted thousands of years.”

“Good question,” said the girl. “It didn’t fall apart—it was knocked down.”

“What, by the villagers? I’d heard that while some of the Nobles’ castles fell into ruin, it wasn’t possible to destroy them.”

“There are some that could be destroyed and others that couldn’t. This is one

of the ones that couldn't be wrecked. But a Noble could do it."

"You mean on purpose?"

"That's the only thing I can think of."

The two of them stood in front of a stone pillar about thirty feet from the heart of the ruins.

"Why would they have done that?" Ry inquired, feeling slightly dizzy.

"I don't know. Maybe it broke some sort of taboo. Maybe they just didn't need it anymore. But based on how thorough the devastation is, it sure must've been one hell of a good reason!"

"To destroy a concert hall? Your theory's starting to sound pretty shaky."

"Nuts to you. Let's see what you have to say after you've seen this," Amne said, approaching the stone pillar with a sullen expression. Bending over, she touched her hand to a spot at the base, and the pillar spun around smoothly. A hole ten feet in diameter now lay where the stone column had towered.

"Don't just stand there with your mouth hanging open; pick your jaw back up," Amne said triumphantly. "You see, I found this switch during my investigations. Wanna go down?"

"What's down there?"

"I have no idea. Actually, I've never descended before."

"So you mean you simply found it, and that's all?"

"I'm a historical investigator, you know. Not an adventurer."

"Oh, so you'd leave all the dirty work for the boys, then? Wonderful."

"I've heard enough out of you. Get going already."

"Well, I'm not an adventurer either," Ry told her.

"You're a man, aren't you? Don't you want to see what's down there? If you discover booty left by the Nobility, it could be worth a fortune."

Putting his hand to his face, Ry wiped away his sweat. The sunlight was too strong. It looked so cool down in the hole.

“I’ll give it a shot,” he said.

“That’s the spirit!”

From the brink of the hole, a set of whitish stone stairs descended into the ground. Once they were five steps down, the chilly air swept over Ry. At the same moment, the lights came up. A lamp in the wall had gone on.

“It still works. Can you believe this thing?”

“We’re talking about the Nobility here,” Amne reminded him. “The Nobility.”

A short while later they reached the bottom. There was a corridor, and the ceiling was fairly high.

“I wonder which way we should go,” Amne said, looking around in all directions anxiously.

“This way,” Ry told her, pointing one way as he began walking. Even he wasn’t sure why he’d chosen this particular route. Proceeding straight down the corridor, they came to a black steel door. As they stood before it, it split open right down the middle. The darkness beyond it was dispelled by the very same devices that’d done so on the stairs. Taking a step in, the pair then froze in their tracks.

In the ash gray space that seemed to have been scooped out of the very rock, countless humans lay like ghouls. Though their garments were filthy and tattered, they were those of ordinary villagers. The stark and waxy luster of their faces was not the fault of the lights.

“What . . . what the hell are they?” Ry said, trying to keep his knees from buckling.

“I don’t know. Maybe they’re people who were bitten by the Nobility.”

“No, they don’t have a mark from the Nobles’ kiss.” And having spoken, Ry turned around. Amne had just drawn a sharp breath. The girl had her fist to her mouth.

“Look. The clothes on those people over there—they’re awfully old-fashioned. But these ones are just like my own. Could it be . . . Are these the victims from before the Nobility disappeared . . . and then the people who were bitten when

they came back again twenty years ago . . . ?”

“I already told you, they haven’t been bitten,” Ry snapped irritably, but then he froze. His face turned to Amne of its own accord. Amne was looking at him as well.

“These are the people called here by the song,” she said in a tone without cadence.

III

“Weren’t they killed?”

Amne shook her head at Ry’s question. “They lived. But I wonder who could’ve hidden them down here.”

“I don’t know about two hundred years ago, but how about the families of the victims from twenty years back?”

“Who knows? That time, there weren’t very many of them at all. Look—one, two, three of them all told. And on top of everything, they’re with the people from two hundred years ago, of all things. You know, we should go back to town and ask around about it.”

Just then, Ry caught a certain scent.

“Hey, you’re not hurt anywhere, are you?”

Amne furrowed her brow. But it took less than a second for her expression of consternation to become one of horror. Bending over so quickly it was like she’d been snapped in half, she stared down at her right ankle. “It’s bleeding. I scraped it on the stone stairs on the way down, but . . .”

Ry’s gaze was riveted on the people around the room, and how they’d started to stir. How their eyes had opened . . .and how they now got to their feet not with the jerky motions of a marionette, but slowly and smoothly.

“. . . it doesn’t really hurt. I just banged it up a little bit.”

“Don’t look straight ahead,” Ry told her.

The people in the chamber were already standing. Staring at them.

The pair began to back away. Amne turned her face to the floor; she just wanted to whip around and run like hell. But the others would probably break into a sprint as well.

They went through the doorway. Though she prayed they wouldn't follow her, the people stepped out into the corridor completely unperturbed. Amne let out a scream. As Ry tried to catch her collapsing body, he lost his balance.

"Snap out of it!" he shouted as he grabbed her and staggered to his feet. The pale countenances were right in front of him. Amne's body twitched in his arms. The people of the night advanced effortlessly toward the pair.

When the two of them reached the surface again, they collapsed exhausted on the grass. The world brimmed with sunlight and the scents of life.

"I guess we made it . . ." Amne muttered, the words sounding more like a question directed at herself.

"Yeah," Ry said through ragged breath.

"But how? I passed out when they surrounded us, so I couldn't tell. Are you really that tough?"

"I don't know. But I do know that they all started to sing."

"A song? Down there, at a time like that? That's like something out of a comedy," the girl said, though her face was still pale.

"But it's the truth," Ry told her, closing his eyes.

It all came back so quickly. Strangely enough, the scene didn't fill him with revulsion. Who could've imagined the song of the crystal-clear night would flow from the lips of filthy people clad in rags? As he'd shoved his way through them, Ry had felt a pang of regret in his chest. The song was that sad and forlorn. For the last twenty or two hundred years, probably nothing save that song had passed their lips down in that hole in the ground.

"Those called by the song didn't crave blood after their return, but merely wandered the village by night singing that song—the legends must be true!"

“Impossible,” said the girl. “I’ve never heard of such victims.”

The two of them looked at each other.

From behind them, a rough voice declared with naked delight, “Sounds like you two saw some pretty interesting shit. Tell us all about it.”

A handsome young man and another man in a uniform stood ankle-deep in the sea of grass. Ry realized in an instant that these two were the ones that’d been following him.

“You said something about singing, didn’t you?” Price said as he came closer. “Who did? Those things underground? I suppose we’ll have to dispose of them.”

Although his tone was decidedly cruel, Price’s remarks were perfectly justified. The law of the Frontier was that every last person who’d received the kiss of the Nobility was to be isolated and eradicated. As a matter of fact, Amne nodded a bit at his remark.

Ry couldn’t understand why he then stood up and shouted, “No! You mustn’t kill them!”

Bijima’s eyes bulged in their sockets.

Price wore no expression at all—his eyes simply shome with a new gleam. A dangerous glint.

“You heard the song, too, didn’t you?” said the beautiful warrior.

At Ry’s side, Amne gasped in surprise.

“A lot of people must’ve heard it just as we did. And yet, only the two of us came to this village at the same time, almost as if we’d been invited. Why do you think that is?”

“I don’t know anything about your situation,” Ry said as he shielded Amne. He could feel the tension radiating from every inch of Price so keenly it hurt. “I wanted to hear the song my father sang one more time. So I came here. That’s all there is to it.”

“And I can’t say I blame you for wanting to do so. However, I get the feeling that merely by undertaking the same endeavor as myself, you’ve become an obstacle.”

Ry didn’t know how to respond.

“Step aside. We’re going to execute the requests of our employer. And the Nobility and their entire ilk must be destroyed.”

“Stop! You can’t do that!”

The change in Price’s expression was truly a sight to see. Shades of something that wasn’t quite perplexity alternated with a look akin to understanding, but before settling on either emotion, the warrior asked, “Why would you protect them? It doesn’t seem to be out of some sort of youthful humanitarianism.”

And then his voice dipped lower, as if he’d suddenly thought of something, and he said, “Are you certain nothing happened last night?”

Ry didn’t answer. He couldn’t.

“Not that it matters much. We’ve got to hurry up and take care of that group down below.”

Opening a flap on his uniform, Bijima pulled out a square lump. There was a slim silver tube stuck in it. A fuse—and the block was plastic explosive. Judging by the pinkish color, it was an incendiary charge. While the fifty-thousand-degree blast might not kill true Nobles, it would be far more than their servants could withstand. Bijima’s thick fingers gave the fuse a twist, and then the man brought back his right arm for an underhand throw.

“Stop it!

The boy was about to rush forward when a flash of white zipped right in front of his nose. As he recoiled, the bomb flew in a parabolic arc over his head. But another line intersected it in midair. Destroying the fuse alone, a stake of rough wood came down and stuck in the bushes.

“D?” both Ry and Amne shouted, while Price muttered the same name with infinite hatred. The blade he’d swung at Ry should’ve taken off the boy’s head. But at the warrior’s feet was the long thin stake that’d thrown his footwork into disarray.

In a spot fifteen feet from either of the warriors stood the Vampire Hunter in inky black, backed by a colossal carving of a demonic head with eyes bulging and

fangs bared.

“What are you doing out here?” Price asked as he took a step back with his right leg to avoid the stake that’d foiled him. When he and his compatriot had left the mayor’s house, they’d come straight here. And they’d been given instructions from D that they’d be free to do what they liked until night. The ruins were something they’d learned about at a bar soon after they’d arrived in the village.

“I followed the boy,” D replied succinctly.

“I see. Let’s call it a day, then,” Price said, returning his longsword to its sheath. “But I will have to report back to the mayor the fact that you spared a horde of Noble reserves.”

“There’s no need to do that,” D replied, his voice borne on the wind—a wind with an edge like a knife.

As Price stared at him in amazement, he continued, “You were going to cut him down, weren’t you?” He was referring, of course, to Ry.

A second later, Price decided what he had to do. There was no use trying to deny anything with this man.

“Keep out of this,” he bade Bijima as he stepped to the fore, but as simple as that sounded, trying to take on D empty-handed was an act of complete insanity.

A chill raced down Ry’s spine. The other man looked so utterly defenseless, it was actually unsettling.

D dashed forward, the wind swirling in his wake. A silvery glint raced from his scabbard. And right before the Hunter’s eyes, a vermilion flash flared into existence. Still stuck in the same pose as when he’d brought his blade down the first time, D made no second attack.

But he hadn’t slain his opponent. Price leapt back about six feet. In his face, a pair of red lights blazed. His eyes.

“How do you like my evil eyes?” Price asked as he blinked.

Anyone who saw the demonic red light that radiated from his pupils would be blinded instantaneously, and there was nothing they could do to restore their sight. It would also send enough pain searing through their brain to drive a person insane. The eyes had the very same effect on even the most vicious of beasts or demonic creatures. The fact that the young man in black still held his sword—or worse, that he was also still on his feet—could’ve only seemed like a miracle or a nightmare to Price.

“Now’s our chance. Let’s kill him! And then we’ll do the same to the freaks down below!” Bijima urged, but a powerful hand stayed him.

“Fall back,” said the handsome but paled warrior.

“What?!”

“Look,” the blond warrior said, his trembling hand indicating his own front.

Bijima took a sharp breath despite himself.

Price’s chest had been slashed in a straight line from the base of his throat to his abdomen.

CHOSEN BY THE SONG

CHAPTER 4

I

Oh, he’s a big deal all right, but he’s had it now. Leave him to me!” Bijima said, giving Price a slap on the shoulder before taking a step forward.

Did D notice the bizarre contortions the man’s belly was undergoing?

“You know, I’ve got a nickname. Embarrassing as it is, I’m known as ‘Bijima the Second Stomach.’ The village where I was born was dirt poor and cold as hell. Evil bugs or demon snakes, if it was edible, I’d eat anything. And I tried so hard to make things last that I eventually ended up like this. Anyway, I hope you’ll just sit back and enjoy the show.” Chuckling, Bijima added, “Only problem is, you can’t see a damn thing now.”

His uniform split open lengthwise. Since all the buttons remained affixed, he undoubtedly had it rigged with Velcro so it would fly open when he exerted any strength in his belly. But his clothes weren’t the only thing that was rent. The depths of the gap were a deep red where Bijima’s stomach had ripped open. Disturbing creatures spilled from the wound to rustle in the grass. Venomous striped ganja snakes, deadly scorpions with tails raised high, gaseous creatures shrouded in a white mist—and there were more than a few of each variety. Even one of these supernatural creatures would’ve been a nauseating sight, but more and more of them fell to the ground and then trampled a path through the grass as they charged straight for D, Ry, and Amne.

D could probably handle the monsters somehow. However, Ry and Amne would undoubtedly be peering into the abyss of death within five seconds.

Amne fainted without so much as making a peep.

And that’s when it happened. The song that rose from the depths of the earth seemed to shower midday with the still of night.

More than the agitated monstrosities, it was the entrance to the underground chamber that drew Ry's gaze. Before his very eyes, the unearthly creatures rustled back through the grass like a torrent. Surging toward the hole, they became a multicolored stream that poured directly down the stairway, driven by the unholy tune in a march to their own death.

"Son of a bitch!" Bijima snarled in anger. Throwing better judgment to the wind, he drew his broadsword and charged straight at D. It was the biggest mistake of his life.

Though D supposedly couldn't see, his blade left a silvery streak in the air.

Even as he felt something hot in the vicinity of his torso, Bijima kept running out of habit and fell headlong into the hole.

Ry raced over to D. Price had headed for the hills as soon as Bijima turned his blade on D.

"That was incredible! You dropped that bastard with one shot. You can see, after all!"

But after the boy spoke, he quickly bit his tongue.

D's eyes remained firmly shut. And yet, after returning his blade to its scabbard, the figure in black suddenly started walking around.

"Is the hole over here?" he asked, turning in the proper direction with ease.

Ry was filled to the ears with such awe it made him tremble as he gazed at the Hunter, and then he shouted, "It's closing!"

But his cry came too late. The massive stone column spun in the opposite direction of when it'd opened, and before D could even take a step toward it, the hole in the ground was sealed forever.

†

It was just about time for the forest and river to sink into a faint blue hue when they returned to the mayor's house. The blind D had said he was going to go

check on another set of ruins, and though he wasn't the kind of man who'd ask them to lead him there, Ry and Amne decided to accompany him.

Amazingly enough, he seemed to be able to "see" everything around them better than either the boy or the girl. When they started to head into the woods because it was a shortcut, D quickly ordered them to put the wagon's top up. Doing as he said without even knowing why, they didn't have a minute to spare before a swarm of venomous golden wasps attacked.

These creatures wouldn't leave until they saw their prey dead, and they swarmed in wave after wave. The only ways to escape were to kill them all, to remain concealed, or to suffer through sting after painful sting.

But D chose yet another course. He thrust his blade right into the heart of the buzzing insects through the wagon's covering. When he pulled his weapon back inside again, the golden queen of the swarm was impaled on the tip of its blade. Now leaderless, the wasps immediately dispersed. Since he'd struck through the wagon's covering, the Hunter couldn't see his target. The only thing he had to rely on was the fact that the sound of the queen's wings differed from that of the other wasps. Apparently, D's hearing was so keen he could accurately discern that one sound out of the buzz of thousands of wings.

In the vicinity of the village, there were more than a dozen ruins. Vacation lodges for the Nobility, arenas for mechanical gladiators, dams to alter the flow of the river however they pleased—and standing alone amid these decaying heaps of ancient rubble floored in green grass, the young man in black truly looked like some beautiful illusion. But illusions ultimately vanish in time. What the boy and girl saw was nothing short of pure elegance and solitude given human form, a vision that would never be allowed to fade.

As D stood by a stone wall in a garden that had long since been reclaimed by the forest green, Ry walked over and quietly inquired, "You wouldn't by any chance happen to be a dhampir, would you?"

"Can you tell?" asked D.

Ry nodded. "After all, the Nobility's ruins just seem to suit you too well. So well it's scary. For the first time in my life, I actually found myself thinking it'd be nice if more of the Nobility's things had been left in the world."

“What’s lost will never return. The sun has set on one world, and it won’t see another dawn. That belongs to a different time.”

“Are you talking about the Nobility and us?”

“Have you heard stories about the Nobility?”

“When I was a kid, I used to hear them all the time from an old chatterbox of a nanny,” the boy replied.

“And do you remember them?”

“Yeah. Every last one.”

“Were they all scary stories?”

“Pretty much. But there were some good ones, too. Stories about how some machine left behind by the Nobility had healed someone of an incurable disease, or talk about the moon and the stars.”

“Be sure to remember those,” the Hunter told him.

“Because that would’ve made the Nobles happy?”

“No, I don’t imagine it would’ve mattered to them. They never would’ve wanted that. Perhaps it was their wish to wither away without anyone even knowing about it.”

“Then there’s no point in remembering, is there?”

“Not where the Nobility are concerned,” D said, turning his unseeing gaze toward the castle walls. For a second, Ry thought the gorgeous Hunter might just disappear in that direction. “Reflecting and remembering only have meaning for those that do them. It’s not a matter of learning or knowing something, but merely recollecting things from long ago. Maybe you could call it ‘gratitude.’”

“Gratitude?”

Although Ry tried to divine the meaning of the word from what D had said, he had little luck. He posed a different question.

“Why did you follow me, anyway?”

D didn’t say a word.

Sensing something unapproachable in the Hunter, Ry went back to where Amne waited and was terribly surprised. The headstrong girl who headed the historical research society had tears glistening in her eyes.

“What’s wrong with you? You look like hell. If you go and get all weepy every time you see a good-looking man, people will take you for a bumpkin.”

“You ass,” was all the girl could say before she hiccupped. “Doesn’t it make you sad? Don’t you feel anything when you look at him? He’s carrying a burden that’s really, really old. The weight of what’s already been lost. And because of it, I’m sure he’ll never . . .”

“He’ll never what?”

“I don’t know. I just can’t find the right words. But you’ve gotta be able to see it, too. If you can’t, you must be a real blockhead.”

As the girl’s back shuddered again and again, Ry stroked it gently.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to call you a blockhead.”

“It’s okay. I’m used to it.”

“He’s going to go away.”

“Everyone does, you know.”

“You’re just a kid, so don’t just regurgitate platitudes.”

“But it’s true,” Ry told her. “Even if we don’t have any way of knowing just where it is we’re going. The Nobility didn’t know—and we humans don’t either.”

Just as Amne’s case of hiccups was getting especially bad, D came back.

“Did you make her cry?” asked the Hunter.

“No way,” Ry replied.

“You’re going to be quite a heartbreaker.”

“You’re the last person I wanna hear that from,” the boy retorted.

“Shall we go?”

“Sure!” Amne said with a vigorous nod, her eyes swollen from her tears.

There was no sign of the mayor at her house. When the servants were asked about her whereabouts, they said she didn't appear to have left.

"I'm heading up to the mansion," said D. "You two can come with me part of the way, and then head back to the inn."

"At this hour, the sun will be down before we reach the inn," Ry countered. "We'll stay here. If I lock the place up tight, it'll be fine. Plus, I've got earplugs. If the song was going to lure me away, I think it would've done so last night. But if you're that worried about us, hurry back."

"Understood," D said after eyeing first Amne, then Ry. "Take good care of her, heartbreaker."

The boy didn't even have time to growl at that remark before D had gone.

Darkness quickly descended. The mayor didn't come home. A servant showed the boy and girl to their respective bedrooms.

Right after Ry climbed into bed, he heard a knock. Going over to the door, he asked who it was, and a female voice replied, "Me."

"What is it?"

"Open up. It's so creepy being all alone I can't get to sleep."

Amne was dressed in pajamas. Ry recalled that twenty years earlier, the mayor had a child who'd been lured away by the song.

"Oh, a girl?" he said to himself.

"You're damn right I'm a girl. Where have your eyes been?"

"No, I didn't mean you."

Amne seemed to be glaring intently at the boy, but then she suddenly threw herself against him and told him to hold her.

"What for?"

"I'm scared, you idiot."

Though she clung to him despite his attempts to push her away, her zealous and feverish form made Ry think of something. Suddenly the boy said, “You know, I’ll be moving on soon, too.”

“Stop trying to be like Mister D. Back at our inn, we’re shorthanded and could use some help,” Amne said, putting her strength into the arms she’d twined around Ry.

Heartlessly prying his way free of the girl, Ry got to his feet. The severity of the gaze he concentrated on the door made Amne’s anger turn to fear.

“What is it?” the girl asked.

“Someone’s coming.”

“What?!”

“From the first floor. They’ll be coming up the stairs any minute now. And there’s a bunch of them.”

“Well, I don’t hear anything. And how come you know all this?”

But Ry couldn’t afford to let that question leave him reeling. The footsteps from the first floor were now climbing the staircase, and even Amne could hear them gathering just beyond the door.

“I don’t like this,” said the girl. “Who on earth could it be? I didn’t think there were even that many people in the whole house.”

Just as Ry was considering an escape through the window, there was the sound of the lock being disengaged and the door slowly opened. The figure that waded into the feeble light was familiar to the two of them. As were the wraithlike figures that lingered to the rear.

“You’re still awake, it would seem,” the figure said.

“But you’re . . .” Amne began through chattering teeth.

“Madame Mayor . . .” said Ry.

D got off his horse in the courtyard. A crisp incandescence filled the ruined

garden this evening. Moonlight. He looked at the window. A human figure melted into the fleeting lamplight.

D entered the mansion. As he walked down the ancient corridor, he seemed terribly well-suited to the mansion by night. More than anyone else, this young man was a perfect match for decay.

The door to the room was open. The beautiful figure that sat by the window turned to face D.

“A little late, aren’t you?” Price said mockingly.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m waiting. For the singer, that is. I, too, grasp the beauty of the night.” Once the youthful warrior had confirmed that D had his eyes shut, his expression became one of amazement.

“And are you going to become a descendant of the night?” asked the Hunter.

“Why would you ask that? You know something after all, don’t you? Once again, I ask you the same question. Why have you come here, D?”

“But that’s not something for the singer to decide,” D continued in a leaden voice.

“Well, who shall decide then?”

“The will of the night—the one who created both the singer and the song.”

“And that would be—?” Price began to ask as he left his place by the window without a sound. His eyes were giving off a red glow.

The seat by the window was reserved for the singer. Price was dumbstruck as he gazed at the woman in the gossamer gown. Particles of light glistened in the folds of her dress.

“I have heard your song,” Price said in an absent-minded tone. “And that’s why I’ve come here. I finally realize that I was summoned.”

But there is need for only one of you, a voice chimed in his head—the voice of a lady. A voice so beautiful it would be impossible to judge what kind of woman she was.

“Then that would be me.”

There is one more. And he will surely come here as well.

“So, who gets to decide?”

The will of the night.

Price looked at D. The man who’d given the exact same reply as the phantasmal singer had solidified into a statue hued like the very darkness.

“Who are you?” he asked. “What are you supposed to be?”

His answer came quickly.

“I’m a Vampire Hunter.”

But D’s next words were directed at the illusion: “There’s more than one of you.”

Is there?

The voice in his head fell silent, and the figure by the window moved as if to display how shaken she was.

Perhaps you are correct. But who would know that there’s more than one of me? That’s something about which I myself am not certain.

“When will the other one be here?”

Soon.

On hearing that reply, Price turned to D with a terrible light in his eyes. “When that time comes, you’ll only be in the way.”

It was a challenge.

“I believe I’ll get rid of you now. However, doing it in here would be too unseemly. Let’s make it the garden.”

Under the pale moon the two of them squared off on a path paved with marble. A stand of trees was singing the music of the night. The wind.

Which of them would have the advantage here? D was blind. Price was unharmed. However, the warrior’s evil eyes would no longer serve him against the Hunter, and it didn’t seem likely he could defend himself from the swordplay

of even a sightless D.

“Have at you!” Price said as he dashed to the right. His broadsword went undrawn as his finger raced across the surface of the remote control he held in his hand.

The marble blocks beneath D’s feet flipped over. Pushed up by flames, the stones were swallowed by the sky. Five gouts of fire went up.

He didn’t think that would be enough to slay D. From the cover of the decrepit fountain, Price surveyed his surroundings. The entire garden had been strung with wire finer than a spider’s thread, and if a certain amount of pressure was put on any of those lines, it would unleash a deadly attack.

The five crossbows he’d rigged sent iron arrows off to the right. When Price realized all of his missiles had been struck down with the most mellifluous sound imaginable, he quickly scattered smoke bombs all over the grounds and held his breath. The ability to completely conceal any sign of your presence was one of the hallmarks of an excellent warrior.

A black shadow suddenly coalesced right in front of him. As Price backflipped away, cold air knifed into his shoulder.

Gory blade in his right hand, D charged forward. But the singing put a stop to it.

The song came from the same warrior who had deep red blood spilling from the shoulder he clenched. It was impossible to ignore the Nobility’s nocturne.

In a split second, a wide blade pierced the chest of the spellbound D.

Without a backward glance at the reeling Hunter, Price raced toward the mansion. He’d noticed the hoofbeats of cyborg horses that’d entered the garden.

The other one—

The instant he passed D, a hoarse voice from the vicinity of the Hunter’s left hand said, “Oh, you’re a tricky one, all right,” but the warrior had no time to take pause as he headed toward the new arrival.

Ry climbed down from the carriage. The vehicle he'd taken from the mayor's house was pulled by a team of six. Its rightful owner, Amne, and the inhabitants of the subterranean chamber were standing around it as well.

Price raced over to them. Glaring at Ry, he said, "You or me—which one of us do you choose?"

"It is not we that choose," the mayor told him. "The one who arranged all of this set his plans in motion more than ten thousand years ago. I finally realized that just yesterday. Listen to the girl."

Beside the mayor, a girl with black hair let a nocturnal grin rise on her lips. It was the daughter that'd been lured away twenty years earlier.

"You see, when the mayor's daughter came back, she concealed the girl in that underground chamber. The basement of her own house is actually connected to the area below the concert hall. Her daughter and the other people lured by the song connected the two," Amne said as if beseeching the warrior. This was the truth that could no longer go unsaid. "And all these people lived on. Without ever drinking blood; merely singing that song for all eternity—"

"The reason I was allowed to return was so that I could announce the chosen one and make the necessary preparations for this evening," the mayor's daughter said coolly.

From the way she looked at him, Price knew he'd lost.

"So it's already been decided, then?" the warrior asked. It was an empty question.

"Yes. And it's not you."

"What'll become of him?" Price asked, tossing his jaw in Ry's direction.

"He'll become an excellent singer, I suppose. That is the result of the experiments conducted at one time by the great one beneath the mansion. He'll live forever without drinking blood. But he hasn't been completely changed yet."

"Then you mean he's still not a Noble?"

“The Nobility have already perished. Now it is the human era. However, that is not to say it will always be so.”

“Why? Why choose him?”

“Because he came here without ever hearing the song directly. And that was the very purpose of the song. There are other reasons I could give you, but there’s little point in it.”

“But what if—” Price began, his voice dipping horribly low. Fresh blood continued to spill from his shoulder.

“What if he were to die?” the mayor’s daughter said, throwing a sidelong glance at Ry. “In that case, it would probably be you.”

At that instant, Ry covered his eyes.

With the deadly glow still emanating from his pupils, Price launched himself at the boy’s chest. Drawing a dagger, he stabbed the boy in a single motion.

Amne let out a scream.

Ry staggered around in agony.

Leaving his dagger buried in Ry’s chest, Price smiled and said, “D died the same way. You can follow after him, while I stay here. Forever!”

The warrior’s body and voice convulsed in unison. Slowly lowering his eyes, Price gazed down at the naked blade that had sprouted from his chest.

“D . . .” Ry mumbled as he got up again, and no sooner was the Hunter on his feet than bright blood spilled from the mouth of the handsome warrior. The blade had been pulled out of Price.

Turning just his neck so he could sneer at the gorgeous young man in black, Price then returned his gaze to Ry and groaned, “You two . . . Both of you . . . with your eyes open . . . and run right through the heart . . . So that’s how it goes? I guess the song . . . really wasn’t for me . . . was it?”

The warrior’s last breath escaped him after he’d fallen to the ground.

An aura far more ghastly than Ry had once felt from Price issued from the people of the night.

“If they don’t drink human blood, I wouldn’t call them Nobility,” D said, staring at the mayor’s daughter. “Go on singing the song of the night. Leave the mayor and the other two children here, and the rest of you may go wherever you like.”

“But we’ve been waiting. Waiting so very, very long,” the mayor’s daughter said in a distant tone. “For me, it’s been twenty years. But for the great one . . .”

“Please just let me go, D,” said Ry. “Now I think I understand everything. In the mansion, in a lab you don’t know about, I’ll undergo the last stage. Please don’t interfere.”

“You could still be treated.”

As D said that, his words were joined by a mournful wail.

“That’s right! Don’t go. You can’t go off and become one of those things!”

As the mayor’s daughter grabbed both her hands, Amne thrashed wildly.

“It’s okay. I want to try and see it, too. Try and see the same world as the woman who sang that song.” Then the boy turned and said, “I’m sorry, Amne, but I want you to come with us.”

Perhaps that was meant to keep D in check—if he interfered, she’d be killed.

The whole group entered the mansion. From the corridor they passed into the laboratory.

It seems this is the end, a crystal clear voice chimed in the minds of all.

“It’s over,” the mayor’s daughter said.

The woman by the window grew hazy, dissolving in moonlight.

The mayor’s daughter staggered. To Ry and Amne, it seemed as if the girl had drawn something into herself.

Two that were one—surely it wouldn’t be beyond the Nobility’s science to create such a being.

“And now to undertake our final task,” the mayor’s daughter told her party.

“Stop them, Mister D!” Amne cried with all her might.

“Don’t do this, D,” the other girl said in a bid to stop him. “Earlier, you made

no attempt to slay us. As you said, we don't drink blood. And he's going to become something far greater."

"So it would seem," Ry said with a smile. "Take care of Amne and the mayor. So long."

"No, you can't!" Amne shouted, thrashing until one of her arms popped free of her captor.

A peculiar scent spread through the room. A bit of red stained Amne's arm. As she'd struggled with all her strength to win her freedom, she'd been clawed by fingernails in the process.

"D!" Amne cried.

The mayor's daughter opened her mouth and revealed a pair of fangs.

It was the basement of the concert hall all over again. Apparently they'd only been able to get past the scent of Price's blood. But when all of them charged toward Amne, each was pierced through the chest either by a wooden stake or naked steel.

The mayor's daughter fell to the floor, and in a matter of seconds she turned to dust. Like the fine powder that shrouded the history of this house, her remains shimmered in the moonlight.

Only Ry remained.

"I haven't sprouted fangs yet, but who can say what'll happen next," he said. "I'd probably be better off just having you run me through right now."

"Stop it!" Amne shouted as she jumped between him and the Hunter. "The mayor and I will keep watch and see what happens next. If he winds up like the Nobility—well, then we'll . . ."

Amne hiccuped.

"She said they hadn't done the last part to him yet, right?" said the mayor. Apparently freed now of her daughter's power, she shook her head as she spoke. "That being the case, I suppose there's a chance he might go back to being a normal human being. However—"

There she broke off.

“I really don’t know,” she continued. “Even though I talked with my daughter so many times about humans and Nobles, there is no way to be certain. Which do you suppose is better? What are you going to do, D?”

His only answer was silence.

Showered with moonlight, the four figures simply stood there like philosophers waiting for an answer that would never come.

†

Several minutes later, D cut across the courtyard and exited the mansion. Straddling his horse, he turned back to the building once before riding off. Silhouettes flickered in the lit window. Were there two, or were there three? Quickly facing forward again, D gave a kick to his mount’s flanks.

Shortly after the black rider was swallowed by the darkness, a gentle voice began to drift out into the night from somewhere. There was no saying whether it was that of a man or a woman. But it sang the nocturne.

An Ode to Imagined Fall

THE FALL VILLAGE

CHAPTER 1

I

There were villages that shone in one season beyond all others, and in the case of Shirley's Door, it was the fall. The community of less than two thousand was situated roughly in the center of the Landau Plain, and when its deep green world began to take on the colors of the sunset, the strangest activity took place. The normally taciturn villagers would host travelers who were merely passing through in their very own homes, and many children who were normally cooped up in their houses would race around town while a unique serenity hung in the air. It was as if the fall had granted them special permission. And the people set benches out in front of their gates, listening to the crunch of fallen leaves underfoot on the red brick roads while they shared cheap wine and long conversations all day on holidays and from dusk until late at night on the days that they worked.

"Well, they sure do like the fall there," their nearest neighbors in the village six miles away would say. While their own fall was quite beautiful in its own right, those villagers knew that it lacked something.

The fall people, the fall village, an anonymous poet who stayed in Shirley's Door once wrote. And surely there must be a fall traveler as well. However, that is not my lot. It should be noted that the poet's ode was never completed. The people and village of the fall could never surmise from the verse why the fall traveler was necessary.

But as it happened, that anonymous poet might've done better as a prophet. Because a few years after his uneventful departure from the village, the local inhabitants were to learn why it was they had need of a traveler. This fall, to be exact.

Driving along a lone road that ran through a forest where only traces of green

now remained, Lyle slammed on the brakes. Sending out the sort of malodorous cloud that was a scourge on all around him, his sulfur-powered car halted. After exchanging looks with Cecile, who sat in the seat behind him, he then stared at the rider about to pass him on the right. The road forked about half a mile back on the way the two of them had came, but apparently some prankster had seen fit to remove the sign that pointed to town. The early autumn fields still brimmed with afternoon light. Even if the rider chose the wrong road, he'd probably have time enough to backtrack and reach the village before evening, but this kindhearted pair still thought it would be an unfortunate occurrence.

When the forelimbs of the white cyborg horse lined up with the front end of Lyle's car, he called out, "Hey," then fell silent. His reaction was prompted by the realization that next to him, Cecile was melting into a senseless mass. She was enraptured, to put it plainly.

Yet the horse rode right by the side of the car without the rider saying a word.

"Hey, you—wait a second," Lyle called out to him only after the rider was a good thirty feet away. Despite the cold reception, he hadn't lost any of his kindheartedness.

The horse halted. The rather dusty coat of the white mount spoke volumes about the distance it had come.

Thinking better of raising his voice, Lyle muttered, "Here goes nothing," as he backed his car over to where the horse and rider waited.

Between the wide-brimmed traveler's hat and long coat was an almost translucent face that peered down at the boy and girl. Cecile began to melt again. The boy knew he had to make this quick.

"You know, there's a split in the road up ahead that's not marked. Go left and you'll hit Shirley's Door, right and you're into the swamp. Get lost out there and it could be a problem. They say the Nobility had a mansion out in the swamp, and it's pretty murky territory even by day."

And once he'd spoken Lyle began blinking his eyes. If he didn't, he thought he'd lose his mind, too. Looking at a face that beautiful would draw the wrath of Heaven.

“You have my thanks,” the rider in black said, raising his left hand casually. His voice had a patina to it that was painfully masculine.

The disparity between the face and the voice sent a chill down Lyle’s spine. It almost felt like a sensual shudder.

“I’d like to ask you something else as well,” said the rider.

“Sure. Please, ask away.”

“Do you know where ‘Helga of the Red Basket’ lives?”

Lyle looked at Cecile. The eighteen-year-old girl was still in a daze, so the boy elbowed her to return her to her senses.

“I know,” she said.

“So, you’re some acquaintance of old Helga, are you? Don’t tell me you’re the ghost of her husband!”

Although the boy thought it was a rather witty remark, he got no reply.

“Take the road to the right that he just mentioned and follow it into the forest,” Cecile continued. “Please be sure to keep your eyes open on the right. The first house you’ll see on that side is hers. If you’re not careful, it’s pretty easy to miss it.”

The rider touched his right hand to the brim of his hat. Cecile understood that this was the greatest sign of gratitude this traveler could show.

“Okay, watch yourself then,” Lyle said.

In a hurry to distance himself from such a character as quickly as possible, the boy let out the clutch. And the traveler’s horse began to walk away.

Some bittersweet impulse made the girl turn as they sped into the horizon.

“By the way, my name’s Cecile. And this is Lyle. Would you be so kind as to give us your name?”

The traveler in black turned to them. Although he was so far away they shouldn’t have been able to hear him, Cecile caught a fragment of his voice. Borne on the wind.

“D,” the fall traveler had said.

With her trademark red picnic basket stuffed full of plums, old Helga returned home. The scarlet-stained western sky was nicked by the silhouettes of trees. Even after noticing the white horse tied to the hitching post by her front door, the old woman wasn't the least bit surprised. In almost a century of living, there'd been over a hundred things more amazing than a sudden caller, and this particular guest certainly wasn't unexpected.

Putting her hand on the top of the horse's neck, she enjoyed the feel of its artificial hide as she said to it, "Where's your master at?"

A sharp crack came from out back.

"Out at the woodshed, is he?"

Setting her basket down on the front stoop, she had just finished turning the corner when she encountered a figure in black. Seeing the great bundles of kindling he had under either arm, she remarked, "It's not every day that you see a Hunter chopping wood while his employer's out. You're Mister D, I take it?"

The young man nodded. The air stirred—even it felt his beauty.

As if it were a sight too terrible to behold, the old woman averted her gaze and stared at the wretched little hut out back. "Looks like there's enough kindling to last a hundred years back there. How long you been splitting it, anyway?"

"I got here three hours ago," said D.

"And in all that time you didn't bother to go inside, but chopped wood instead? Some of them upstart Hunters would've gone on their way or forced their way into the house. You've had a darned good upbringing, haven't you? Why, I can tell that just by looking at your face. At any rate, welcome!"

Old Helga's request was a little out of the norm.

"Soon we'll be full on into fall. And when that happens, the Nobility are gonna play hell with the village."

Her request was that D take care of them. Ordinarily, someone who'd suffered an attack would hire him personally, or in cases where a whole community was

plagued by the Nobility, a representative would handle his employ. It was unheard-of for an old woman who wasn't a victim of the Nobility and seemed to have almost no chance of becoming one to hire an expensive Vampire Hunter for the sake of the entire village. Especially when she said the Nobility wouldn't appear until fall.

"Do you have any proof?" asked D.

"Not really. But if you want to get technical, there's always this."

The crone put the contents of her basket on the wooden table. Several pieces of the black and rotting fruit rolled by D's hands.

"It really became noticeable how bad they were getting about a week ago—the same day I contacted you. Now they're all rotten. I've lived a hundred years, and I don't think this is any accident of nature. I had given some thought about holding off until I was completely sure, but that would've meant waiting until victims started cropping up."

"And what have you called me here for?"

"I'm getting on in years and don't have much time left. And I want to do some good while I'm still here. If you can, I'd like you to keep my name out of this while you go about your business."

"There probably won't be any problems, you know."

"If that were the case, you wouldn't be sitting here now. But rest assured, I'll pay you as agreed regardless. Besides, just getting to sit here staring at your face like this, I get the feeling it'd be worth it just to meet you. You want to know why?" the old woman asked as the silent embodiment of beauty flickered in her failing vision. After raising a steaming cup to her lips and taking a sip, she continued, "Actually, you're a lot like my husband. Not your face, of course, but your general mood."

According to what the old woman told him, her husband had joined a group trying to track down a Noble in a neighboring village about eighty years ago and had never returned. No body was ever found, but she never heard from him again, nor did the slightest rumor ever reach her ears. It'd been summer when he'd set off, so she'd believed he'd be back in the fall, and even now the old

woman continued to wait. Fortunately, even eighty years later, she still experienced the season known as fall.

“The fall?”

“Yes, the fall. In our village, everything starts in fall. That’s when we gather our food for the winter, and when we collect the seeds we’ll sow in spring. It’s even when we store the water we’ll need in summer. Fall is when people pass away and when others are born—and it’s when handsome travelers come along, too.”

“I heard the Nobility had a mansion here,” said the Hunter.

“Yes, for about the last five hundred years. They say they just abandoned everything and disappeared a hundred years ago, but at any rate, there was no one out there by the time I was born.”

“Why did they disappear?”

“I wouldn’t know. They were real cruel Nobles, and had an awful lot of robotic servants. Apparently they were researching something.”

“There’s no sign of it out there. I wonder if I should’ve drained the swamp.”

“You mean to tell me you’ve already gone and had a look?” the crone said, her eyes going wide. “In the span of three hours you went out to the swamp and split a whole shed full of wood to boot? You really aren’t a blessed thing like the others, I guess.”

“Is it far to the village?”

“About thirty minutes if you gallop all the way. I suppose you could call this the outskirts.”

Helga asked him to hurry and at least check out the ponds if he could.

“I don’t suppose anything could’ve possibly been slumbering there for the past century, but just to be safe. And they’ve got a custom here in the village that has me worried,” the old woman confided.

“And that is?”

“They offer a sacrifice, a real fine-looking girl. And that’s how they get them to leave everyone else alone.”

II

The night air was comfortable.

The girl had gone out to pick apples. On the east edge of town in a spot known only to her was a tree that spread its branches like a folding fan. Since before its fruit was fully red and ripe, the tree's bounty had been filling her mouth with its refreshing sweetness whenever she sank her teeth into it.

By the girl's side was a young man. Ever since finishing secondary school the two of them had been inseparable, and the villagers figured in a few years the couple would throw a modest banquet and be together for all time. Under the tree in question the pair of bodies intertwined. But before the boy's arms could draw the full strength of his passion, the girl pulled back and with just the sort of mischievous teasing unique to their age, she circled around behind the tree trunk. The scent of the fruit in the night air—the scent of fall—lifted the girl's spirits. Tonight would no doubt be a special night.

The girl grabbed one of apples that swayed above her head and plucked it from the tree. Her lips were quite red despite their lack of lipstick, and as they closed around the fruit, her white teeth bit into it with a crisp snap. Mere seconds later, the girl spat out what she'd taken in her mouth. The bits that scattered at her feet and the fruit in her hand were rotten and black on the inside. Grabbing another one, the girl squeezed it between her fingers. The fruit cracked open and black juice dripped from it.

Driven by fear, the girl called out the young man's name. But no matter how many times she shouted it, he didn't come. Terror tightened its corset around her.

The girl circled back around the tree trunk. The young man stood exactly where she'd left him, and although it looked like he hadn't moved an inch, there was something different about his pose. Both his arms were out in front of him, forming a rough semicircle. If the girl were to slip between his arms and his body, it would've made for a fiery embrace. However, that embrace was not for her.

Still calling his name, the girl touched the boy, at which point the seemingly faithless lover who'd forgotten all about her toppled over without a sound.

Why was it that her eyes were immediately drawn to his neck? Wrapped in a swell of powerful muscle, his throat had been split open like a pomegranate. It was easy enough for the girl to surmise that this was a fatal wound.

Without even trying to get him back up, the girl spun around and was embraced. Even before she felt the terrific force of the arms that wrapped around her waist, the nape of her neck was ripped open. As her hand clawed out in agony, it caught hold of an apple on one of the larger boughs. And when the fruit shattered in her wildly clutching fingers, sure enough, it was black to the core.

"It's started!"

That's what old Helga went into the barn to tell D around noon the next day, when she came back from town.

"Gall the carpenter's daughter and the Sarayas' only son have been killed. They were found lying in an apple orchard in the eastern part of town this morning by the orchard owner. From what Doc Harmon says, it seems it happened sometime between two and five last night."

"Didn't their families go out to look for them?"

"Well, no one noticed that they'd slipped out of their bedrooms. Anyway, it's perfectly natural to go somewhere and chat with someone on a fall night."

Fall—the season when quiet loves were spoken.

"Did you take an impression of the throat wounds?"

"I sure did."

Picking up the piece of fast-setting clay the old woman produced from her basket, D stared at it intently.

"If their blood hadn't been sucked, you'd never know from this it was the work of a Noble, would you? Must be one hell of a crude Noble, though. You reckon it was a servant of the Nobility or something?"

“It was a Noble,” D asserted softly. “However, there’s something odd about this.”

“How’s that?”

“This wound is rather strange. I get no sense of the life force of the one who bit them from it.”

“Huh?” the crone said, her eyes bulging in their sockets. “You mean to tell me there’s life in the Nobility?”

“Perhaps ‘unlife’ is the word for it,” D replied, his fingers playing across the surface of the clay like a physician searching for an injury.

“In that case, could it be a robot or something that bit them?”

“No, that’s not it, either. I’ve never felt a ‘presence’ like this before.”

“Damn,” said Helga. “And here I was thinking it was going to be the Nobility. Now don’t you think for a single minute about letting this thing get away.”

“I only do what I’m paid for.”

The crone struggled for words, finally saying, “I was positive it’d be the Nobility, but now we’ve got one hell of a surprise on our hands, don’t we?”

“Where are their corpses?”

“At this point, they’d be in storage—but in another hour, they’ll be off to the crematorium. By sundown, they’ll be ashes.”

And once she’d finished speaking, the crone backed away as if she’d received a terrible fright. D had just stood up.

“All that kindling . . . You didn’t chop that for me, did you?” the old woman said as she pointed to the pile. “Look how neat it’s split. Fact is, you sliced it, didn’t you? Practicing for a fight with the Nobility.”

The wind that blew in through the doorway made the Hunter’s long hair dance like the shadows.

The old woman realized she’d been mistaken. She’d thought things had started with the discovery of the first two victims. But that wasn’t the case. Now that this gorgeous youth was ready to make a stand, everything would begin. Nobility

versus humanity—this was a matter of life and death the likes of which could be seen nowhere but in the schematics of battle.

D got off his horse in front of the morgue. In general, that would be adjacent to the sheriff's office or the hospital, and in the case of Shirley's Door, it was the former.

The sheriff happened to be in his office at that time, and at first he responded in a guarded manner. But on hearing D's name, his demeanor quickly became warmer.

"So you're D, are you? Never thought I'd meet the real deal. To be honest, we're in a bona fide bind. Well, go on and look all you want. Of course, there are already a couple of folks in there ahead of you. They just got here, but they'll be going soon."

Leaving the sheriff's office, D slipped in through the doors to the stone building that housed the morgue. An old man who seemed to be a deputy took one look at his face and bugged his eyes.

On opening the steel door at the end of the hall, he was greeted by a desolate space. Three of the walls had windows to let in the light, but aside from that, there was nothing in the room save the wooden tables directly ahead of him that held the corpses.

Before those tables, a pair of faces turned in D's direction.

"Oh, you?" Lyle said with a touch of nostalgia while Cecile promptly felt a flush of crimson rise in her cheeks. "Fancy meeting you here. I didn't think you were any ordinary customer, but, uh—you're not a Vampire Hunter by any chance, are you?"

"Call me D."

For an instant Lyle's mind went blank, but he quickly reeled back with surprise. By the time he'd returned to his original position, his eyes were ablaze with adoration.

Nudging Cecile's elbow, he said to her, "Hey, you hear that—he said he's D.

We've got the Frontier's greatest Vampire Hunter right here! Now you'll be safe as money in the bank."

Cecile's gaze clinging to him all the while, D went over to the corpses. Their rubber bags had been unzipped to the waist. Bloodless, the young man and woman's bodies looked like puppets. Rigor mortis had already begun to set in. Even the suture that ran in a straight line lent them an air of the surreal.

As D touched his fingers to the horrid wounds of the dead, the living couple watched him. When D quickly stepped away from them again, the boy asked him what he was doing but received no reply, the figure in black heading straight for the steel door as if he'd forgotten all about the other pair.

"Hold up a second," a flustered Lyle called out to him. "Would you just let me talk to you for a second? I'm sure it must be fate that's brought us together like this. We need your help."

"We're begging you," Cecile added, her head bowed.

D stopped and turned to the pair.

"I've heard that in this village, they'll put out a sacrifice if this is the work of the Nobility. Are you it?"

As the Hunter asked that of the girl beside him, Lyle's eyes went wide. "How on earth did you know that?" he asked.

"A minute ago, you told her she'd be safe as money in the bank."

"I suppose I did, at that. So long as we've got you here, this can all be settled without Cecile having to be sacrificed. The bastards here in the village are a bunch of weasels. Every time there's trouble, they leave it to one girl to bail them out and then decide to keep quiet about it later. Ha! Like they know for sure that's gonna make the Nobility behave themselves or move on to another area."

"When were you selected?" asked D.

"Not long ago—maybe an hour back."

The mayor and all the other influential members of the community had come to her house and given her the news, the boy said. This very evening, Cecile would be left out in the place where the Nobility had the greatest chance of

appearing, and she'd have to spend the whole night there.

"Would that be the swamp?"

"Sure enough," Lyle replied. "And I'm gonna keep her company."

"You mean this sacrifice isn't sent out there all alone?"

"The village's second mayor was a good enough person. He allowed the girls to have a single escort. And Cecile is an orphan, you see. She's got no one to look out for her but me."

The young man actually looked rather proud as D quietly gazed at him.

"We don't know for sure whether or not the Nobility were actually responsible for this," said the Hunter.

"You mean there's a chance they weren't?"

The boy and girl looked at each other.

"I've heard there are demonic creatures in the lands to the west that rip open throats and drink the blood. Why don't you try telling that to the mayor?"

"It's no use. He and all the rest of those pigs are already dead-sure this is the work of the Nobility. They won't listen to anything anyone has to say."

"Why don't the two of you leave the village together?"

The pair exchanged looks of astonishment—they'd never even considered it an option. There was such solidarity in communities out in this cruel environment, no one could even think of leaving. A hue of hope tinged their faces, but it rapidly faded again.

"That won't work."

"I can't," Cecile said as she stared at D.

Though there was sadness in her eyes, they lacked the kind of baseness that would've clung to him for succor. Her limited stores of self-restraint were doing a remarkable job of keeping her fear at bay.

"My adopted mother and father still have to live here. If I were to run off instead of playing my part, the wrath of the whole village would come down on the two of them."

“In short, the one responsible has to either be caught or killed,” Lyle said, slapping his hands together. “Come on, we’re begging you. Help us out here. We don’t have a lot of money, but we’ll do what we can to repay you.”

“I already have another employer,” D said, turning toward the steel door.

As the lovers watched, the door shut again. But at that very moment, the two of them could’ve sworn they heard a hoarse voice around D’s hip say, “Well, you sure ain’t the most accommodating guy in the world.”

At the fork in the road, D bore left. His destination was the former site of the Nobility’s mansion—the present swamp. The reason he’d gone to the morgue was so that he might examine the wounds left by the Nobility in person. But his fingertips had found nothing but failure. The bizarre information related by the clay cast was an accurate representation of the real thing. That being the case, there was nothing left to do but wait for his foe to appear.

Regardless of his situation, he’d be able to make the first move so long as it was still daylight. And so the white horse and its inky black rider followed the road down a hill to reach a gloomy region shrouded in a drifting miasma.

Covering roughly six square miles, the swamp was dotted with nearly twenty bodies of water of various sizes. Despite the local climate, bacteria in the water kept it from ever dipping below seventy degrees, and the toxin-laden murk not only killed any animal that approached, but also gave rise to freaks immune to its poison. Aside from those villagers who collected such monstrous beasts for a living, no one ever ventured there, even by daylight.

Leaving the path he’d visited the previous day, D dismounted by the shore of a small pond near the center of the swamp. Between the various bodies of water there were narrow roads and iron bridges that appeared to be from ancient times, but many of them had taken on a weird coloration or were hidden by thickets of trees.

On the left-hand side, D sensed an intense presence—a darkness that he alone would’ve felt.

“Damn it all!” cursed a voice he’d heard before.

“It’s that guy. Looks like he followed you. You intend to just abandon him?”

Not replying to the hoarse voice, D went back to his steed and brought it to a gallop. After racing along for five minutes, he could see Lyle struggling by the water’s edge. Spray was flying everywhere. The bluish-black hue of the water was no doubt due to the algae in it.

Lyle’s opponent was a creature that resembled an octopus. Nearly a dozen sucker-covered tentacles were wrapped around the boy’s limbs, and the creature was trying to pull him into the depths. Lyle was armed with a steel harpoon. Though he attempted to stab at the creature’s bulbous head, the blindingly quick movements of its tentacles always interfered and the boy had all he could do just to keep the weapon from being taken from him.

As D halted his horse, Lyle turned and looked at him. Even locked in this deadly struggle, he’d apparently had enough presence of mind to notice the sound of the approaching hooves.

“Stay back!” he shouted. “I don’t want this freshwater octopus getting anyone else on top of me. Just stay back and watch.”

“That guy’s a real scrapper,” said a voice that sounded thoroughly impressed as it came from the vicinity of D’s left hand.

D went down to the water’s edge.

“I told you to stay back!”

“You’re at a distinct disadvantage,” D noted in an uninflected tone.

“Not a chance. I’m just about to declare victory—oof!”

As his leg kicked into the air with a watery spray, there was a tentacle coiled around it.

Toward the bottom of the head, a pair of unblinking eyes glared at its prey.

“Damn! Hey, don’t even think of helping me,” the boy told the Hunter.

“If you drown, you’ll leave Cecile all alone.”

“Help me!”

D didn’t go into the water, but there was a flash from his right hand.

A tentacle was severed—the same tentacle that was wrapped around the harpoon. The head of the octopus quivered. Its high-pitched squeals became a clear cry of pain when the steel harpoon landed right between its eyes.

Pulling his weapon from the octopus's head while the creature's spasms continued and it sank into the pond, Lyle fell back into the water for some time and simply tried to catch his breath. But the one who'd been about to die in the depths soon wanted to get back on dry land. Apparently his heart was also made of steel. When he glanced up quickly, D was just getting back on his horse.

"Wait—wait just a second there. Hey! You trying to tell me you didn't come out here to help us?"

Not answering the boy, D gave a kick to his mount's flanks. At the same time, his left hand went into action. To the ordinary eye, it would've looked like a pair of arrows had suddenly materialized in his fist. But D had easily plucked these missiles flying with enough force to penetrate stone right out of the air with his bare hand.

"That's what I came out here to tell you. The folks from town were following you—"

D was already facing in their direction.

On the opposite side of the lake, about a dozen riders had formed ranks on the high ground at the top of a good-sized hill. The bowmen at either end of the group had their second shots nocked.

"Don't move. The next time we won't miss," the giant in the middle bellowed. Based on the armored chest plate and the gauntlets he wore, he must've fancied himself the toughest character in the village. His confidence was made manifest by the rapid-fire crossbows that hung from either hip.

"That's the leader of the local guards. Bazura's his name. Used to be a drifter and a mercenary, and he knows his stuff. He's a lot better with a bow than what you saw just now," Lyle said in a weary voice.

The rest of the group—with the exception of the elderly man to Bazura's left—must've been members of the town guard. Once they saw that D wasn't moving, the group raced down with a thunder of hoofbeats, surrounding the rider in

black in under a minute.

“How did you know I was here?” D asked, not sounding the least bit tense.

“Well, I heard about you from the sheriff. First, we went out to old Helga’s place. She’s been going on for some time now about how the Nobility were coming. After we knocked her around a little bit, she ’fessed up to being your employer. As for why we came out here—well, call it a hunch.”

“We patched the old woman up fine. Rest assured,” the older man said as if interceding. “I’m Murtock, the mayor. I’d like to thank you for saving my boy. He might not be much, but he’s my only son and I love him.”

“For what that’s worth,” Lyle said, shrugging his shoulders in the water. “Well, I have nothing to do with these clowns. I swear it. You’ve gotta believe me.”

“You’ve always been such a bumbler. I told you the next time you crossed me I’d disown you,” growled the mayor.

“I haven’t had anything to do with you ever since mom died.”

“Why don’t you just act your age, kid?” Bazura told him. The remark seethed with malice, and Lyle spat at him in reply.

“Old Helga has already given her agreement. You’re to leave the village immediately,” the mayor told D.

“She hasn’t said anything to me.”

At D’s reply, tension scorched the air.

“Don’t try to bluff us, Hunter,” Bazura said as he rose in the saddle. “I’ve heard all about your skill, but no one’s ever half as great as they’re made out to be. It’s ten against one and you don’t have your sword out—and even if you drew it, we’d be too far away for you to reach.”

It seemed their leader was at least smart enough to recognize the difference between bows and swords.

Surveying the ten bows now turned on D, the mayor said, “We decide how things go in our village. And we don’t need any help from outsiders.”

Putting his hand in his coat pocket, the mayor pulled out a little bag and threw

it down at D's feet.

"There's twice what Helga was going to pay you in there. Take it and be on your way!"

"Gee, I really wouldn't do that," Lyle said in a frightened tone. "You're dealing with Vampire Hunter 'D' here."

Before the boy had finished speaking, cries rang to the heavens. Two men—one positioned in front of D, the other behind him—had toppled backward holding their shoulders. The steel arrows stuck in each of them were the very same missiles they'd fired at D a short time earlier. And the instant that chilling realization dawned on Lyle, a white beam blazed across his retinas—a flash of light that danced across impossible distances. Bows and steely arrows flew into pieces. And that was only the start. The neatly severed fingers of the men who'd held them flew through the air as well.

"Huh?!" the mayor exclaimed as he stared down dumbfounded at the blade leveled at his nose.

OUT IN THE NIGHT

CHAPTER 2

I

Why the hell don’t you do something, Bazura?!”

Though his voice was hoarse, the mayor actually didn’t completely comprehend the current state of affairs. His mind couldn’t conceive of anything except the sword tip that’d appeared before him in a split second. He didn’t have the faintest inkling why the members of the town guard targeting D hadn’t shot him with their bows yet.

Bazura didn’t move. He thought he’d reply, but his voice wouldn’t come out. A warm fluid was spilling in vast quantities from a cut that went halfway through his neck. Without time to raise the rapid-fire crossbows from either hip, or rather, before he could even think of doing such a thing, his subordinates had had bows and fingers carved from their hands, and his own throat had been slashed open. But more than that, more than anything, he was stopped by the unearthly aura that gushed from the handsome young man before him. He finally understood that this opponent was from an entirely different world.

“What do you intend to do with me?” asked the mayor.

“Never meddle in these affairs again,” the Hunter told him.

“Oh, whose affair is this?”

The tip of the sword brushed against the base of his nose. And no sooner had it done so than the end of his somewhat hooked beak was sliced off neatly. With a scream the mayor reeled backward, falling back against the ground headfirst—right on top of the same bag of gold he’d thrown down.

“I—I see. I’ll never do it again!”

The mayor frantically brought his hand up to his nose, where fresh blood quickly seeped out between his fingers.

Ignoring the howling men on horseback, D turned and headed back the way

he'd come. It was strange how not a single one of the mounts whinnied as he left.

More than malice, more than anything, it was fear that colored the eyes of the mayor and Bazura as they watched the Hunter go.

"Like I tried to tell you, he's Vampire Hunter 'D,'" Lyle said to them somewhat snidely.

Once the mayor's group retreated in their sorry state, Lyle got on his horse and galloped off the same way D had gone. His sulfur car had been left back in the village. However, the only reason he'd been able to follow the mayor and the others out to the old woman's house, then beat them to the swamp using a route known only to himself, was because of all the long days he'd spent driving through the area in his vehicle.

At the edge of a small pond he found D. The Hunter was bent over, picking the broad leaves of a plant that grew in profusion near the shore. But what would he do with them?

In no time D went down to the water with a number of them under one arm and threw one out onto the surface. And then he took a steady step onto it. The leaf was a foot in diameter. Though it might've been capable of supporting a small animal, there was no way it could ever support the weight of a human being. And yet the leaf didn't sink at all, but merely trembled a bit. One after another D threw the leaves out in front of him and moved across the path—and the water's surface—like a weightless illusion.

The tenth leaf brought him to the center of the pond. Peering down at the surface by his feet for a few seconds, the figure in black then sent up a spray and left a set of ripples as he dove into the water.

Racing down from the path to the pond, Lyle began to count the seconds instinctively.

Ten seconds . . . Twenty . . .

Although there was no evidence that the Nobility had once had a mansion in this area, in his boyhood Lyle had repeatedly heard the elders relate fantastic

stories about seeing the dark sorcerers who slumbered in the middle of the swamp gather en masse on a misty night, when the water suddenly cleared and allowed them to glimpse a palatial mansion in its depths. Could it be that was what D had seen?

Two minutes . . . Three . . . Five . . .

Despair tinged Lyle's heart. He knew that D was a dhampir. Those descending from Noble blood lost half their strength in running water. If D were to be attacked by the freshwater octopus's brethren in force . . .

One of the leaves plopped out of sight. Beginning with the ones closest to shore, they were sinking.

Nine minutes . . .

The last leaf vanished . . .

Ten minutes.

A black figure bobbed to the surface. Before the boy could even confirm that it was D, the Hunter began doing the breaststroke back toward shore. The hundred feet took him less than five seconds. On seeing Lyle, he remained expressionless and wiped his face.

"Was there anything in the water?" the mayor's disowned son asked.

"The sun will be down soon," D replied.

Though it didn't address his question in the least, his reply was good enough for Lyle. After all, the girl was going to be locked out in the sacrificial hut on the village outskirts all alone tonight.

"What are you gonna do?" Lyle asked D as the latter walked off toward his white horse. "If you keep an eye on Cecile, the Noble will probably show up. Kill it and your work will be done, right? Come on! Go out there with me."

D galloped off without a word.

As the gloomy figure rode away without a backward glance, the boy shouted at his back, "You're cold-blooded! And an ingrate! I came all the way out here just to warn you that you were in danger!"

His vain howls of rage echoed for quite some time.

Although she'd had every intention of waiting until Lyle got there, it looked like he wouldn't make it in time. When the group from the town guard came to her house to "escort" her, she thought she was ready, but her legs still trembled terribly. Her adopted father said nothing, while her adopted mother alone stepped outside and bade her farewell as the tears welled in her eyes. The only thing that kept Cecile going as she was loaded into the carriage and driven out to the hut on the outskirts of the village was the knowledge that in return for her sacrifice, the village would give her parents enough to live on for the next ten years.

The hut was furnished with nothing save a table, a chair, and a bed. Once the men had Cecile safely inside, they then locked the door and left. This wasn't intended to keep the Nobility out. It was to prevent Cecile from running away.

Not long after the men's footsteps faded, Cecile smelled the odor of blood in the night air. The men had spread it around so the presence of the sacrifice might be known.

As the minutes passed, Cecile's mind slipped further and further into panic. There was no way a girl of eighteen could sit calmly and wait for her own demise. There were only two reasons she didn't smash the chair against the door in an attempt to break it or flip over the table—because the furniture was too heavy, and because she was still thinking about the couple that'd raised her. Instead, the girl crouched on the floor and pounded the bed with her fist as she sobbed.

Just how much time passed she couldn't say. Cecile suddenly lifted her head. She was horribly cold. The tracks of her tears were freezing. The depths of her ears froze.

There was a harsh rasping sound on the far side of the door. Like a key turning.

Cecile felt like her heart had shrunk down to nothing. Just when it seemed like she could take no more, another sound dealt the final blow to her heart, closing around it like a fist. The creak of hinges. The door was slowly opening.

The girl reflexively moved to the wall opposite the door. Though she wanted to let out a scream, it caught in her throat. She'd never seen a Noble. While their appearance and actions in the elders' tales had always been incredible, those had always been mere stories that ended with the telling. Or so she'd thought. Now a deep fear came back to her from the marrow of her bones, from the depths of a darkness she never could've imagined, climbing the long, long stairway to the underside of her soul.

It stood in the doorway. And it came as little consolation that it was a girl about her age but far more beautiful. Her face had nigh-translucent skin, and at its center glowed a pair of red lights. The ground rustled dryly. It was the sound of the hem of her blue dress dragging across the floor.

From behind the woman, the autumn night breezes billowed into the hut through the doorway. Somewhere out in the forest, men and women from the village would probably be talking of love again.

The girl closed her eyes.

Nothing happened.

Unable to stand it any longer, she opened them again. The woman stood before her. Just as she noticed the white fangs in that mercilessly gaping mouth, the girl also saw leaves blow in through the open door. As Cecile's mind was about to plummet into the abyss, she sensed that the woman had stopped.

"Hold it right there, you bastard—or bitch, I guess," Lyle shouted, adjusting his grip on his harpoon as he stood in the doorway. "What do you think you're doing, woman? Back to the cursed pages of history with you!"

"A man?" the woman seemed to say to herself as she pulled away from Cecile's body. "A woman's blood is sweet but thin. A man's is bitter but thick. And that's what I like. I believe I'll feast on you first."

The face that turned in his direction was ferocious in its beauty. A lock of black hair had slipped free of her dazzling jewel-encrusted hair clip and fallen across her face, and the fangs that peeked out over her grinning crimson lips were

razor-sharp. Was this a Noble?

Even as terror froze the blood in his veins, Lyle raised his harpoon and said, “If it’s me you want, come and get me. But not in cramped quarters like this—I’ll take you on outside.”

“You would have me leave the girl? I’m afraid that won’t happen.”

As if pushed by the woman’s sneer, the door behind Lyle slammed shut.

“Damn it all,” he growled.

“I like confined spaces. Your screams echo in such places, and the shadows of your death throes dance on the walls. This way, I can savor the experience. Drink your blood leisurely. I want the girl to watch your humiliating end.”

“Shut your yap!” the boy bellowed, his words shattering his own fear.

Capable of sticking in rock, the harpoon flew with unerring precision at the left side of the woman’s chest and actually imbedded itself in the stone wall behind her.

The woman grinned. Not so much as a single drop of blood stained the wound. What’s more, the very shredded fibers around the tear in her blue dress seemed to knit themselves back together and repair the garment.

“Had enough fun and games?” she asked. “That’s all the resistance your kind can offer mine. You had your nerve to think you could ever rule the world in our stead.”

“It’s just the natural flow, you antiquated bitch,” Lyle shot back as icy sweat clung to every inch of his body. “Your era’s over. And I’m gonna drive that point home now!”

The woman closed on him. Her gait brimmed with confidence.

As he backed away, Lyle pulled out his final weapon. Although it would be dangerous to use it indoors, he had no alternative. Come what may, Lyle would rescue Cecile or die trying. If he couldn’t save her, he wanted to die right along with her.

The black bottle he waved drew a stare and a sneer from the woman. But before her very eyes, white smoke began to rise. The bottle contained a powerful

acid. Left completely exposed, the woman's eyes were seared by it. And the white smoke was proof that her skin was dissolving.

Slipping past the woman as she clutched her face without speaking, Lyle raced over to Cecile and scooped her up. Her throat was free of injury.

"Serves you right!" the boy said as he slipped by the woman once more with Cecile in his arms. But as he did so, his shoulder was caught in a terrific grip. Flesh and bones compacted beneath its force. The boy couldn't even cry out.

Grasping Lyle's shoulder with one hand, the woman used the other to cover her face as she quietly got to her feet.

"That was the last straw. I have no need of your blood. First I shall tear your legs off, and then as you thrash about in agony, I'll allow you to watch as I do the same to the girl."

"Let go of me . . . Dammit!" Lyle screamed, his words painting an arc across the room. Even after slamming into the far wall, the boy tried to shield Cecile as he fell to the floor, but the woman bounded toward him to seize him again.

A streak of white light burst through her chest from behind, and the figure in the blue dress barely maintained her balance as she dropped to the ground. The first thing the woman did was look at her chest. A bloody flower now blossomed there.

Seeing the face of the person in black who stood in the doorway, the woman thought that he was the only one who could've possibly managed such a thing.

"What . . . what are you?"

Her voice was like a cry of pain, but it also held a kind of fascinated praise.

"What are you?" D said, repeating the very same question. "Last night, two people had their throats torn open on the east edge of town. Was that your doing?"

"Suppose I said it was?"

White light traced a cross in the air.

When the table she'd kicked across the room had been sliced to quarters, the woman retreated to the wall to her rear. As both her palms came in contact with

the wall, cracks raced across it like the threads of a spider web, and then her form slipped through the newly made hole into the darkness with a rough wooden stake hurtling from D's left hand right behind her.

There was no response.

Becoming a black wind, D slipped through the hole.

A gunshot rang out from somewhere in the woods.

As D ducked, hot lead whizzed right over his head and bit into a distant tree trunk.

D could feel the woman's presence melting into the stillness of the forest. As he twisted around, he let a rough wooden needle fly toward where the shot had originated.

A man's scream rang out, and another shot flew off into the heavens.

Concealed behind a tree some fifteen feet away, a gentleman who looked to be a middle-aged farmer was slumped on the ground clutching his right wrist. A two-shot rifle lay by his feet. Undoubtedly the shock of the needle's impact had been enough to make him drop the weapon.

"You . . . you damned monster! Don't you lay a hand on my Cecile!"

That cry made the person's identity clear.

Hearing the voice, Lyle dashed out while still nursing his hip.

"That's Cecile's father," he called out, putting a stop to any further trouble.

After Cecile had been seen off, her adopted father had spent a long time grumbling to himself before he finally loaded his rifle and headed off to save his beloved child. Cecile's parents knew better than anyone what thoughts occupied their daughter's mind when she'd quietly accepted her fate.

Once D revived Cecile and she'd opened her eyes, she and her father threw their arms around each other and wept.

"So, what are we supposed to do now?" Lyle asked D, dabbing at eyes swollen by contagious tears. "She's safe for tonight, but come tomorrow, the village goons will splash more blood around. We can't leave her here. And if she goes

back to her house, they'll catch her right away."

"Leave her here."

"What did you say?!" her father exclaimed, the color draining from his face. He had no intention of letting her be offered up as a sacrifice a second time.

It was Cecile that vetoed the idea of relocating her family, saying, "If we were to move somewhere else and they found out about me, they probably wouldn't take us in. Besides, my father and mother are too old to be starting over someplace new."

Even if they were to break the edicts of the village and run off, their likenesses would be communicated to all the neighboring villages, and in most cases local rules would bar them from entering any other community. In order to start a new life, a fugitive had to travel far across the Frontier.

"Leave her here and guard her by night. Then destroy the Noble by daylight and everything will be fine."

Lyle clapped his hands together at D's assessment, saying, "That's a great idea! Let's go with that."

"Good luck then," said D.

"What do you mean? You still don't feel like helping us out?"

"There's reason to fear the Nobility could go looking for other victims. If that happens, both you and the girl's father will be in danger since you helped rescue her."

"I suppose you have a point there," Lyle said as he went pale.

Whether or not they actually believed offering a sacrifice would limit the damage done by the Nobility, if Cecile remaining unharmed caused others to be victimized, the mayor and his cronies wouldn't take it quietly. The responsibility wouldn't fall solely on Cecile, but also on Lyle and everyone else who'd aided her. Even if the sheriff tried to intercede, a lynching might be unavoidable.

"You might be the great Vampire Hunter 'D,' but even you can't keep an eye on the entire village. For better or worse, we've gotta find that Noblewoman while the sun shines and pound a damn stake into her."

Pulling his harpoon out of the wall, Lyle donned an anxious expression.

“I put this right through her heart and it still didn’t matter a bit to her. Noble or not, something’s just not right about that.”

“There are all kinds of Nobles,” D said, his reply surprising Lyle. “Fearing slaughter at human hands, some replaced their flesh with machinery. Some can change their molecular structure at will, becoming a mist or a rainbow. Others literally have muscles of steel. But the woman who was here tonight was unlike any of them.”

“A foe the likes of which you’ve never even heard of? This is utterly hopeless,” Lyle remarked as he folded his arms.

“You don’t suppose that Noble will attack anyone else, do you?” Cecile inquired anxiously.

“It’ll take her at least two days to recover from the needle I put through her. She’ll be in no position to attack again. Tonight should be safe.”

And leaving them, D stepped outside.

Lyle followed after him. Mouth bent in a frown, he said, “I’m through asking you for anything. Just watch—I’ll keep Cecile safe all by myself.”

“Good for you,” came a voice from D’s hip as he sat in the saddle.

For a second, Lyle was stunned.

“That voice really doesn’t suit you. Stop talking like somebody’s granddad. But I want you to remember something. Me and you might end up going after the same thing. If that happens, I don’t wanna hear any talk about me being in the way or screwing things up. Because I’m gonna protect Cecile my way.”

D began to ride away without saying a word.

Behind him, Lyle waved one arm and shouted, “Thank you. I’ll never forget that you saved her. Your face might be an iron mask, but you’re a good enough guy.”

Then the boy sighed, “I may not be crazy about my father, but he is the mayor. Guess I should call a meeting with him.”

III

“Where are you going?” the reins seemed to ask. The section gripped by his left hand, to be precise.

Getting no reply, the voice continued, “The pond? With your eyes, underwater at night would still be bright as day, I suppose. Was there some lead on the Nobility inside what you found yesterday?”

D didn’t answer—his elegant visage merely stared into the darkness ahead. The wind stroked his hair and fluttered the hem of his coat.

“That woman—she must’ve been the one responsible for what happened last night,” his left hand continued. “In which case, I guess she’s not your run-of-the-mill Nobility. Looks like we’ve got a real pain in the ass on our hands. You figure going down into the pond is gonna solve this mystery? Granted, there seems like there’d be some connection between this and the Nobility’s ‘research.’”

Holding its tongue for a while, the voice then said, “The wind is cold. And it smells like apples and plums. It sure is fall. This is just the sort of season that’d rouse a romantic Noble. You have to wonder if the timing is a coincidence or—huh?”

Just before the voice let out that final cry of surprise, D had pulled tight on the reins.

The road left the forest and ran off across the plains. Up ahead the ground rose, and at the very crest of the hill there suddenly stood a pale figure. At the moment, the moon was right over her head.

If the age most befitting this season was seventeen or eighteen, then that’s how old the girl in the white dress must’ve been. If the color most appropriate to this season was a muted green, then that was the color of her hair. And if fallen leaves were the most appropriate thing in this season, then that’s what danced at her feet.

“She’s a Noble, right?” the left hand asked, conviction in its voice.

Had more than one Noble been lured out by the fall night?

A second later, D charged forward on his cyborg horse.

Though it was the sort of fierce gallop that would’ve prompted even a good-sized man to leap out of the way, the girl stood and waited without so much as twitching. Eyes the same color as her hair reflected D, and her expression suggested she was lost in contemplation, spinning a eulogy for D and the fall.

From up on his mount, D brought his right hand around. Just as it had back in the swamp when it sliced through those surrounding him, the flash out of his scabbard painted an impossibly long arc. But D’s blade gave him no indication it’d made contact.

D saw a white mist moving away, driven by the wind his naked steel had stirred. Soundlessly drifting dozens of feet, it collected at the base of a grove off to the left and took the form of the girl.

As she turned to flutter away, D raised his right hand. The blade of his sword was now grasped between his teeth.

A yellowish hue zipped across his field of view.

Barely missing the girl's back, his needle sank into the tree trunk beside her.

"We've got all kinds of things popping up," a hoarse voice remarked. It didn't sound like it was teasing him now.

Moonlight swathed the black rider and white mount as if to further ornament the autumn night. D turned his gaze to his left hand. His fingers now clutched a yellowed leaf. When he put his strength into his fist, fragments of the withered leaf scattered in the wind.

"Did that leaf get in your way?" the mouth that'd formed in his palm muttered. "It finally makes sense why they'd wake up now—these Nobles have the fall for an ally, don't they? That could present a bit of a problem."

Naturally, there was no reply. It almost seemed as if the warrior in black with his heaven-sent beauty was a captive of autumn thoughts.

That night, there were more strange occurrences than had ever happened in the history of the village. At the time the Vampire Hunter was facing the girl in white out among the fields, dozing old Helga suddenly woke in her little house and tried with almost no success to fathom the dream she'd just had. At about the same time, a couple that'd been in a neighboring village on business returned home to find their daughter sitting in a chair in the living room instead of sleeping. On shaking her by the shoulder, they suddenly found that she was dead. Shortly after that, Mayor Murtock was pulled back to reality and his bed by an argument between one of his servants and his son, who'd forced his way into the house in the middle of the night.

"Since you've been disowned, you're not his son any longer. It'll simply have to wait until tomorrow."

"In the eyes of the law, we're still father and son. And this is urgent," Lyle blustered back, and then he laughed aloud at the sight of his father with bandages wrapped around his nose.

"This is probably the happiest I've ever been to see you," said the boy.

“State your business.”

“I want you to give the guards the following orders: Look for the Noble’s hideout by day, patrol around each and every house in town by night, and if they see a Noblewoman in a blue dress, they’re to get in touch with us.”

The mayor gazed at his son in disbelief.

“So, you’ve seen a Noble, have you? Then I guess you went out to Cecile after all. Tell me it isn’t so—you couldn’t possibly have gone and interfered with the Nobility!”

Though the mayor’s surpassing rage made him cringe, Lyle didn’t back away.

“It wasn’t interfering. At any rate, Cecile safely made it through her first night. Did you understand everything I just told you? You robbed me of my mother. The least you could do is try and make up for it.”

“She died because of those damned bandits. Instead of acting like a good son, you’ve been nothing but trouble up till now. So don’t try playing the victim.”

“When those bandits attacked your wagon, mom would’ve survived if you hadn’t cut the horse free and taken off with them on your own. Don’t let anyone else die now.”

“. . . So, Cecile is fine. And this proposal of yours—I take it you didn’t come up with that on your own. That Hunter’s in on this, isn’t he? Well, he hasn’t heard the end of this yet!”

“Before you make any crazy plans about revenge, we should take care of the Nobility first. I’ll protect Cecile. All the rest of you have to do is find the Noble. And then the pretty boy will do the rest. You’ve seen what he can do, I’m sure.”

The mayor fell silent. Lyle’s words had gone right through the bull’s-eye. When the mayor lost the tip of his nose, his heart was filled with fear and anger—and a hope that was almost a prayer that maybe this young man would be the one.

“Okay, that’s all you have to do. There’s no need for your people to battle the Nobility. All we need is enough manpower to find the thing,” Lyle said, pressing the issue now that he saw the promise in his father’s reaction.

“Oh, we’ve got the manpower—to kill D, that is,” Bazura said as he pushed his

way through the doors. In his arms he held a girl with death sealed on her paraffin pale face.

“What’s all this?”

To the mayor, who’d just risen from his chair, he said, “It looks like your kid has really gone and screwed things up for us. This is Shakero’s daughter. Her parents got back from the neighboring village a little while ago and found her like this.”

“It can’t be . . .”

Two stern gazes poured down on the stupefied Lyle like boiling water.

“It appears it’s the Hunter we’ll be searching for. And you won’t be getting off scot-free either, Lyle. Where is he?” the mayor asked, once again in the well-practiced role of the obstinate old man free from even a shadow of a doubt.

HUNTING THE HUNTER

CHAPTER 3

I

After awakening from her strange dream, old Helga hadn't been able to go back to sleep, and seeing D as he returned before dawn, she gasped, "Well, I'll be . . ."

Even in the darkness the Hunter seemed to gleam like steel, but every inch of him was soaked. Droplets of water rained incessantly onto the floor.

"Went for another swim, did you? You've been having a devil of a time, too," she said intently as she rubbed the bandaged wrist that Bazura and the others had injured during the day.

"Are you hurt badly?" D inquired.

"Funny you should ask. They took a whip to me and split the flesh right open."

"I'd like to see it."

"Huh?" said the crone, adding in a somewhat unsettled tone, "Well, you sure do have some strange interests, don't you? Wanting to see somebody else's wounds . . . Did you find anything in the pond?"

"I want to check on something."

"Okay. You know what's best."

With a deftness hardly befitting her age, Helga began to spiral the bandages off her wrist.

"Look at that, would you."

The forearm she presented had nearly four inches of freshly broken skin that left the flesh below exposed. The orange tint to the wound must've been due to some ointment. When D had returned there during the day, the old woman had already finished patching herself up.

"Thank you for showing me," D said softly.

“So, what in blazes did you find? Are there Noble ruins at the bottom of that pond after all?”

“There are.”

The old woman bugged her eyes, and then, as if suddenly realizing something, she asked, “Did you learn anything? About what they were working on out there, I mean.”

“A world.”

“What?” said the crone.

“Did the Nobility here have any children?”

“Now that you mention it, I do believe there was one . . . though this is simply going by the legends . . . I believe they had a daughter.”

“What was their daughter like?”

The Hunter’s rapid-fire questions left the old woman’s head spinning.

“Well, this is just what I’ve heard. They say she was a great beauty. Only the girl was every bit as cruel as her father, and every night she’d go into the village, choosing only little boys and sucking the blood from them until they were dead. As for her appearance . . . they say she had pale green hair and always wore a white dress,” the crone said, training a searching gaze on D. His countenance was so exquisite she thought she might lose herself if she continued to stare, but the Hunter didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow.

“Did they have any other children?” he asked.

“Nope. Never heard any mention of anyone else. Oh, that’s right,” the old woman said, clapping her hands together. “I don’t know anything more about the girl, but apparently there was a lady-in-waiting who was always with her, practically like her shadow. And that compared to her master and his daughter, she was even more—”

“She was about eighteen or nineteen. Black hair and a blue dress.”

“That’s right . . . You mean to tell me she’s the one who’s been running around?”

“She’s the one who went after the sacrifice, at any rate.”

“You don’t say! Seems like the strangest thing has popped up. She sounds like real trouble. If you don’t hurry up and find her hiding spot so you can pound a stake through her heart, we’ll have a lot more victims on our hands.”

“One of my stakes did go through her heart.”

Silence descended—a fearful silence.

“One of your stakes . . . stuck in her chest . . . and you mean to tell me she still got away?”

“So it seems.”

“It can’t be. She can’t be indestructible . . . can she?”

“I’ll do my job.”

The crone let out a long sigh and relaxed her body. “I get the feeling I’ve lived this long just to hear you say those words. I’m counting on you, D.”

Sluggishly rising to her feet, the old woman turned toward the window. Her curtains weren’t drawn. A watery light colored the eastern sky.

“The colors sure are different on a fall morning. Stay in the village a little longer, D. If you do, you’ll see every leaf in the forest ablaze with red. And then when they start to yellow, the village will be the most beautiful place on earth.”

“I can’t let my work go that long,” said D.

The old woman gazed at the black rider. His elegant profile faced the windows. Old Helga realized this young man would never look upon the blazing trees of fall. He wouldn’t be in the village that long. If he was still here at that time, it would undoubtedly be because the villagers had discovered the corpse not of a Noble, but of the Vampire Hunter “D.”

A detailed scene abruptly formed in the old woman’s brain. D’s back. As golden leaves fell in a wild dance, the young man in black was silently walking away. That was probably the whole reason he’d come.

Faint grief filled the crone’s heart. She reflected on her hundred years. The endless cycle of joy and anger and suffering and sadness had left her a withered

branch. But now what flowed through her was a thought more dire than anything she'd ever felt before. What could cause her more distress than this? No matter how old they might grow, human beings lived on, repeating the same pains over and over again.

To the old woman's side, the autumn night was giving way to daybreak.

". . . There is something we can do," the old woman said to D. "Long ago, I learned a spell from a conjurer who came to town. It can locate a vampire's hiding place. Since it's rather taxing, I didn't want to do it at my age, but I suppose I really should give it a go."

Perhaps prompted by her decision, a hand so beautiful it gave people goosebumps gently came to rest on her stiffened shoulder.

"If my employer winds up dead, there wouldn't have been much point in calling me here."

"Don't worry about that. Part of the blame rests with me. If only I'd gotten in touch with you earlier—as soon as I noticed something wrong with the apples."

"I won't try to stop you."

"I know, I know. That's fine, because I'm doing this on my own. But at least I'll hold off until I'm not quite so drowsy."

D turned to the door without saying a word. Even with the superhuman endurance of a dhampir, he still required sleep. Especially during the day.

†

She intended to get right up again, but three hours passed. After drinking a hot cup of tea, old Helga set about making her preparations and, an hour later, when she'd finished scribing magical wards on the floor, she heard the sound of something snapping through the air. It repeated time after time, and upon realizing that it came from out by the barn, she was just about to run out there when a man's hands covered her nose and mouth from behind.

Bazura and his men had unlocked the back door and slipped in with silent footsteps.

As the gasping, struggling crone witnessed the smoke and flames rising from the barn, she went pale. Out in the garden, bowmen with flaming arrows had the tiny shack surrounded.

“Don’t make a sound, granny,” Bazura said in an intimidating tone.

He had an artificial voice box buried under the bandages that swathed his throat–one of the more useful items the Nobility’s civilization had left the world.

“Daybreak is when a dhampir’s metabolism is at its slowest. And there’s nothing worse at that point than an attack with fire. Even the renowned Vampire Hunter ‘D’ won’t be able to get out of there. I’d like to see him try. He’ll wind up target practice for a score of bowmen who can get off three shots a second. Don’t take it so hard, granny. Because he went and saved Cecile last night, someone else was victimized right away. So now he’s just getting what he’s got coming. Hell, even the mayor knows what we’re doing.”

Seeing that the strength had drained from the old woman, Bazura ordered his men to release her.

“How could you do this . . .” she groaned like a patient at death’s door as she feebly collapsed into a chair. “The Hunter was our last hope. That young man might’ve saved the lives of hundreds or even thousands here in the future.”

“Relax. We’ll look out for the village. All of us are gonna go out and turn over every last rock and pebble searching for the Nobility. So instead of worrying yourself to death, old-timer, go brew some herbs or something.”

“What about the sacrifice?”

“If you mean Cecile, we put her back in the same place. Only this time we took her folks into custody. They won’t be giving us any more trouble. And we threw the mayor’s little rascal behind bars, too.”

“You still don’t get it, do you? This isn’t the sort of Noble the likes of you can destroy!”

“Watch you mouth!” the second-in-command bellowed, ready to give the crone a taste of the back of his hand when suddenly there was a commotion outside that sounded like a mix of surprise and terror.

“Is he out?” Bazura shouted as he dashed over to the window, a crossbow clutched in his hand.

Suddenly D was standing in front of the howling inferno the barn had become.

“Run for it, D!” the old woman cried. “They’re gonna kill you and put Cecile back out at the same place as a sacrifice!”

“What are you doing?! Shoot him!”

The shoulders of the bowmen trembled at the harsh order from the second-in-command, and their bodies were so tense it was as if they’d been turned to stone. Yet not one of the arrows aimed at D was released. While flames leapt from parts of his black raiment, he stood there quietly—and his beauty and intensity touched all of them strangely, leaving them completely frozen.

“Damn, we’ve gotta do something!” their leader shouted angrily as something twanged from his fingers.

The steel arrow flew straight for D’s chest—then pierced it! The Hunter hadn’t been able to move a muscle.

Bazura, who’d fired the shot, was so stunned he even cried out, “What the hell?!”

A few seconds after that missile impacted with over two hundred pounds of force behind it, D toppled forward with the arrowhead sticking out of his back.

“Impossible . . .”

Walking over to window in a daze, the old woman received another shock.

“That smell—you smeared that arrow with garlic essence before you fired it, didn’t you?”

“Figured me out, did you? Well, why not—I was up against Vampire Hunter ‘D,’ after all. I had to have something up my sleeve, you know. And then there’s my bow—which I got in the Capital, by the way. It’s got a laser targeting system built in. So once you lock onto something, the arrow will follow its target until it sticks into it.”

And that was the real ace up Bazura’s sleeve.

Turning to those in the garden, he asked, “Well?”

“He’s dead,” said a man who’d fearfully approached D.

“Now for the body—okay, weigh it down and dump it in the pond. I wouldn’t feel very comfortable disposing of it in the usual way.”

Perhaps due to the excitement of having slain D, Bazura’s voice was racing.

Turning his gaze to the circle scribed on the old woman’s floor, he snorted, “Sheesh, I have no idea what you had planned, but if you thought some outdated spell would do you any good in this world, you were sorely mistaken. Hey, now! Don’t make a move. Just sit there all quiet-like and be glad we haven’t run you out of your home. Of course, you’ll probably be shunned by the village anyway.”

Once the group had left, the crone remained in torpor for some time, but then she slowly got up, stood in the center of the magical wards, and muttered, “I’ll try and go on, D. If I see you in the hereafter, I’ll show you where the Noble’s been hiding.”

II

Two men had been charged with disposing of D. After parting company with Bazura and the others, the two of them exchanged unnerved glances more than a few times on their way to the pond. Though they traveled a desolate path where not even a single bird sang, they couldn’t help but get the feeling that somebody was watching them. And from very close at hand.

Going down to the edge of the pond, they put D’s body into a canvas cargo bag, tossed in some rocks, and threw it out into the water. They never even considered bringing it out to the center of the pond to dump it. And that was a wise choice.

After the hoofbeats of their respective mounts had faded and the ripples had vanished from the surface of the water, a long black shaft shot up out of the pond, then sank into the watery depths once more. It was the steel arrow that’d

pierced D's heart.

And in less than the time it took to draw a single breath, a strange phenomenon began to take place on the surface of the pond, which was by no means small. A funnel formed near the area where D's corpse had been discarded, and the muddy pond water rushed into it. A nightmarish tableau, it was almost as if some titanic fish nearly as large as the pond itself was sucking up all the water.

"Damn it! Let me out of here!" the boy shouted as he grabbed the iron bars and rattled them with all his might, but no reply came from the sheriff's office beyond the closed door.

Instead, a voice from the adjacent cell said, "Let it go already. If we make any more of a fuss, they'll see to it Cecile has a hard time of it."

Hearing the opinion of his girlfriend's father, Lyle bit his lip and let the strength ebb from his body. Ever since he'd been taken from the home of his father the mayor in the dead of night and locked up in the sheriff's office, he'd gone through this cycle of resistance and restraint dozens of times. Not long after he was detained, Cecile's father had come. With neither of them knowing what had become of Cecile's mother or the girl herself, the pair was left there alone after the sheriff went out, and no one had been by since.

"Uh, sir, what do you think's gonna become of Cecile?" the boy asked, unable to remain silent in his current state of mind.

"That's what I'd like to know," her father responded in a feeble voice that hardly sounded like the same stalwart man who'd rushed off to rescue Cecile the night before.

They'd probably played out this same dialog more than a few times.

"Oh, damn it all!" the boy exclaimed. He realized they were both looking at rather severe punishments. Half out of desperation, he kicked the bars.

As if on that cue, the door to the jail opened and several figures came in.

"If it ain't the fucking mayor!"

As Lyle wildly reached out through the bars, his father pursed his lips with displeasure. The other visitors consisted of the sheriff and two guards.

“Your punishment has been decided by a meeting of the town council.”

It came as little surprise that even Lyle held his breath for a second at the mayor’s declaration. In accordance with the brutal environment, punishments in Frontier villages were harsh. The lightest was a hundred lashes with a whip. Before half that number had been delivered the flesh would split, and by the end even bone would be visible. After that, the wounds would receive the tender mercy of being rubbed with salt. Needless to say, the stiffest sentence was the gallows. Just shy of that was exile.

“A hundred lashes for each of you. Your wife will not be censured. And you should count yourselves lucky.”

“What the hell have you done with Cecile?!” Lyle bellowed. Far from satisfied with their “mercy,” he was furious. Given how extremely lenient their punishment was, something would clearly be sought in exchange. And with Cecile being involved, it was obvious what that would be.

There before his own son, the mayor stated frostily, “Instead of flying off the handle, you should be thanking Cecile. The fiasco last night is difficult to overlook, but she’s sworn not to go along with any more of your plans. In other words, she’s accepted her fate. She’s already back in the same place as last night, waiting for evening.”

“Don’t underestimate me, you sorry excuse for a mayor! Mark my words, I’ll get out of this shitty little jail and rescue Cecile. And then we won’t have anything more to do with this filthy burg. Before you know it, me and Cecile will be miles from here.”

“Prattle on all you like. At any rate, the two of you will get your licks tomorrow. And I’m sure the Noble will be pleased with our offering.”

“You son of a bitch! You call yourself mayor, and you mean to tell me you can’t think of any way to save the village besides sacrificing our fellow villagers?”

Glancing at Cecile’s father, the mayor said, “Your wife has gone home. But we’ve got someone keeping an eye on her so she doesn’t try anything funny.”

And with those words, he left without showing any sign of even hearing his son's abuse.

"Just accept it," the somewhat affable sheriff said from his spot beside the door. "Bazura says he took out D, too. There's nothing more that can be done for Cecile now."

"D—killed?"

Lyle couldn't believe it. The image of the Hunter effortlessly freezing Bazura and his men with his swordplay at the edge of the pond was still burned into his eyes.

"Yep. Seems they sent his corpse to the bottom of the pond. Dhampir or not, I don't reckon he'll come back to life after a drowning."

Now Lyle slumped to the floor.

Seeing the boy collapse from utter despair, the lawman remarked, "Cheer up. At least Cecile managed to save the two of you. If you're not thankful for that much, you'll get yours someday."

After the sheriff left, Lyle still didn't get up again. From the next cell, he heard Cecile's father sigh.

"It's gonna be okay, sir. D said it'd take that woman two days to recover from her wound. This is the first of those, so Cecile will still be safe."

"But you heard what they said over at the mayor's house, didn't you? Shakero's daughter was killed after we drove the woman off."

"That's gotta be some kind of mistake."

"Even if it is, there's not a damn thing we can do, am I right?" Cecile's father said, his voice a roiling mess of irritation, rage, and grief.

But Lyle didn't reply.

Out on the Frontier, daytime had a far greater meaning than the people who lived in the Capital could ever conceive. For that was the only time people here were really allowed to live—to cultivate their fields, harvest fruit, tend their

cows, catch fish. And in addition to all their other endeavors, there were two more struggles. Chasing off supernatural beasts, picking off fog-like creatures, using a stake driver to halt the demons that might slip in from underground—these were their battles. As for the last one—in some places it hadn't been done for the longest time, while in others it still remained a grave necessity.

In Shirley's Door, it was actually neither. Although a battle hadn't been necessary for a long time, continual and tireless preparations against the night had become a custom of sorts—whittling wooden stakes, sharpening arrowheads, and polishing longswords. Garlic was hung from the eaves of houses, and children's clothes were soaked in its juice. The people thanked heaven that they had plenty of stakes and garlic and could still remember how to use both. However, the one person most in need of these things was given neither, and those who might've helped get them to her were powerless as the daylight slipped away.

III

Getting out of her wagon by the edge of the pond, old Helga went over to the water. Her face was heavy with shadows. The autumn day seemed to be snagged on the tip of a distant mountain. As the crone nervously gazed across the water, a hazy but nonetheless undeniable trace of shock spread through her eyes like a ripple.

"What in the world?" she croaked.

From behind her, a scornful voice remarked, "I knew you'd come."

The old woman spun around, but her eyes found nothing. All she could do was place the voice.

"That's you, isn't it, Bazura? What in blazes would you be doing out here?"

"As if you didn't know. I had a sneaking suspicion some idiot might come out here to try and save the Vampire Hunter. Of course, I only just got here myself. Everything else's been taken care of, but I don't have the least bit of confidence where the pretty boy is concerned. That's why I'm back out here."

“And the level of the pond—I suppose that’s your doing?” the old woman asked as she pointed to the water.

Oddly enough, the disembodied voice didn’t try to conceal its surprise as it replied, “Sorry, I don’t know that trick. But it sure looks like I was right to follow that hunch, wouldn’t you say?”

“Well, in that case, who could’ve . . .”

“Much as I hate to say it, the bastard we sent to the bottom of it,” the voice replied, coolly assessing the situation. There wasn’t the smallest trace of overconfidence in its tone.

The crone shuddered.

“There was something I meant to ask you about earlier, granny,” the voice said, changing the topic. “Those magic wards you drew—I remember seeing them before.”

“Oh, really?”

“Before I came to this village, I saw a conjurer doing his stuff in a town out west. And I believe that was what he used to divine the location of a Noble.”

As the old woman’s face grew pale, he added, “Right on the money, I take it. Well, it’s not going to be D that you tell, but me. Okay, spill it!”

The crone suddenly tried to escape, although it wasn’t anything she’d given any particular thought. Rather, she was so terrified that she acted out of blind fear. But before she’d taken two steps, something got a firm grip on both her ankles.

“What in the world?!” the old woman exclaimed as her momentum sent her tumbling forward, her ankles held by a pair of arms growing out of the ground, of all things.

Once the fingers let go, the arms reached straight up and slowly began to rise higher. Chunks of earth fell free as the person they’d been clinging to—Bazura—pulled the rest of his body out of the ground.

“You—you’re . . .”

As the leader of the guards knocked the rest of the black soil from his body, he

shot a vicious grin at the astonished crone.

“You’ll have to forgive me if I’ve got your heart racing. This is a special talent of mine. If you’d been a foe, I would’ve had a sword or a spear in my hands just now.”

Any battle-hardened warrior would pay close attention to their surroundings and even the sky above them. But how many of them would be able to defend themselves from an attack that came with lightning speed from directly below — from the very ground on which they stood?

“What’s wrong? Did you bust a hip or something?” Bazura asked with a cruel laugh as he readied the rapid-fire crossbow that’d been strapped to his back.

“No, I just remembered something,” the old woman said, inching backward as she straightened herself up. “Twelve or thirteen years back, there was a string of crimes where over a dozen moneylenders were attacked and killed in an area to the east. No matter how much they investigated, the authorities never could tell how the culprit managed to escape, and they say all of the victims were wounded in the belly or crotch. That was you, wasn’t it?”

“How wonderful of you to remember—although I have myself to thank for reminding you of that. Well, now I’ve got an incentive to get rid of you . . .although I’ll give the mayor a different reason, of course. What a pity! You could’ve just kept your mouth shut and lived out the rest of your days, but since you got it in your head you had to do something for this worthless little town, now you have to die before your time. Granted, you’re probably only losing a year or two at most, so try not to take it so hard.”

His finger tightened on the crossbow’s trigger. As a fiend who lurked in the ground, the man probably never expected his own leg to be grabbed. With the limb jerked out from under him with incredible strength, he gave a cry of surprise as he fell face-first. But truly he was a well-trained combatant, and even as he toppled, he managed to twist his upper body and catch a glimpse of his feet. But he didn’t fire the bow. All he managed to do was fall to the ground as stiff as a board with his eyes wide open.

The fingers that released his ankle and retreated toward the pond looked for all the world like the left hand of a person of unearthly beauty.

Unable to even curse, Bazura simply let out a heavy breath as he released an arrow. His steel arrows were powered by blank rounds. Guided in its flight by a laser beam, the lone arrow had only a tenth of a second to travel to its target. It slammed right through the back of the hand and nailed it flat on the ground—or it looked like it would, but a split-second before impact, the hand twisted around with inhuman speed and threw itself into the pond while the arrow sank into the ground, unable to change course on such short notice.

And in that instant, Bazura was certain he'd heard a hoarse voice snidely remark, "Oh, too bad!"

The warrior didn't fire a second arrow, and the next surprise to greet him actually made him shudder.

"What in the world?" he muttered.

He'd just witnessed the hand emerging once more at the same point on the shore where it'd just leapt in. But was it really the same hand? No, it moved differently. In place of the almost manic speed that had allowed it to avert the arrow, now it crept along purposefully, sinking its fingers into the black earth, moving with a grace that would mesmerize any who beheld it.

It couldn't be.

Bazura had just discovered something. Now that half the water had been drained from the pond, he could see the unmistakable ruins of the spires and walls of a castle of some sort out at its center. This was what had come from throwing D into the pond.

When the black traveler's hat rose like a demon of the darkness, Bazura let the second arrow fly. Though it should've pierced the Hunter's head, his left hand caught it in midair. A third arrow flew. In all, the crossbow held six arrows. Each and every one of them was batted away with beautiful sparks.

Darkness sealed the warrior's field of view. Like the rapidly dropping autumn sun, D sailed through the air, his coat spreading out around him like a supernatural bird.

A flash of white light whizzed out from somewhere, and a bloody mist went up. Perhaps D even felt something out of the ordinary when his blade made contact.

Bazura's entire body was covered with an iridescent liquid. Although the tinges of vermilion gushed from the spot on his head split open by D's blade, the rest of the multitude of colors came from a mysterious fluid secreted by his sweat glands. Not only did it save the man from a lethal wound by making D's deadly blow glance off him, it also dissolved the ground at the former mercenary's feet, allowing his body to sink far into the earth in a mere instant.

Launching no further attacks, D walked over to Helga instead.

"I knew it . . . I just knew you'd be everything I expected . . . You survived, didn't you?" the old woman said, somewhat tongue-tied by either fear or emotion.

"Did you hurt your hip?" asked D.

"Not quite. I dislocated it."

Bending over, D touched his left hand to the old woman's hip.

Suddenly getting up again, the crone remarked, "Well, what do you know! It's all better. It's like I had ice on it. You rubbed some sort of secret medicine on me with that left hand of yours, didn't you?"

"Why would you say that?" was the only reply.

Knitting her brow, the crone remarked, "For a young guy, you sure can sound like an old coot."

D said nothing.

"I'd ask you how you came back to life, but I don't suppose you'd tell me, would you? Well, I guess that's okay. Anyway, the sun will be going down soon. Cecile's in danger."

As they headed back to the wagon, the crone recounted the day's events.

". . . and that's the long and short of it. That accursed spell knocked me flat on my back, and by the time I came around again, half the day had passed. But I sure am glad I came out here in the hopes you might've survived."

The two of them got into her wagon.

"At my house, you can get your horse and ride."

“Did you have any luck with your spell to find where the Noble is?” D asked as soon as they were on their way.

“Not really,” the old woman said as she lashed the horse.

The conversation ended, and as soon as they reached the crone’s house, D got on his cyborg steed.

“Be careful. And whatever you do, find some way to save her,” the old woman said as she waved her hand, but her voice swiftly faded away.

His handsome features were assailed by the autumn wind. Through the chilling moonlight he went. D didn’t follow the road. He knew where Cecile was.

Tearing through the forest, his horse raced up a rocky hill.

“Was there anything out of the ordinary about Helga’s physiology?” the Hunter asked as he came to the bottom of a second hill.

“Not really,” a hoarse voice could be heard to say from the vicinity of where his left hand gripped the reins.

“I didn’t find any irregularities either. She’s just a plain human being.”

“Well then, what’s the story with what you saw at the bottom of the pond?”

“I don’t know,” the Hunter replied, his words crumbling under the thunder of the iron-shod hooves.

Without a moment’s hesitation, the voice asked, “What’s wrong?”

D was looking off to the left. Less than ten paces away, a girl in a white dress was running along at exactly the same speed. The pale green hair that fluttered in the breeze carried the scent of fall, and the hue of her skin resembled moonlight.

The rider leaned over to the right. At the same time, his horse bounded. As soon as it came back to earth, it wheeled around sharply. Hooves gouged the ground.

The girl’s feet continued their sprint, while the light of the moon seemed to well up beneath them. Her lithe figure went straight up—and the girl was suddenly in midair.

And above her was D—although when he'd kicked up out of the stirrups was a mystery.

The wind snarled. The blade met proper resistance as it slashed downward, and in its wake, the girl showed her white teeth.

As D straightened up again back on the ground, his eyes caught the white figure slipping into the forest off to the left.

We'll meet soon, said the voice that came to him, riding on the wind. The fall wind. Soon, you gorgeous creature. Very soon.

D sheathed his blade.

"You sure have messed up a lot today," said a voice by his left hip. "Must've been the wind's fault."

Apparently, the source of the voice was aware of how the force of the wind had diminished the power of the Hunter's stroke when he brought his sword down on the girl.

"Where did the girl come from?"

D turned to the spot a short distance away where his mount had halted.

"Seeing how she's showed up practically on top of us both yesterday and today, she's probably following our movements," he responded in a leaden tone.

"In that case, she'd be close at hand, right? How about at the old woman's house? What if the Noble made it her hiding place without the old girl even knowing about it?"

"You think a Noble would live in a human's house?"

"Not really," the voice replied flatly, adding, "But I'm actually more intrigued by something else."

D straddled his horse without saying a word.

"Now, why do you suppose that woman's gone to all the trouble of appearing to us twice now?"

Once again the horse began to tear through the autumn evening. This was the beginning of a long night.

SONG OF THE FALL

CHAPTER 4

I

Sent scurrying back to the guard barracks in full retreat, Bazura pounded on the door. Though he'd used the medicine and bandages in the survival kit he always carried to patch himself up, he hadn't been able to close the wounds at all, and the lifeblood running down his cheek left a vivid impression on him. Having burrowed through the ground until he reached the road, then running the rest of the way, he felt like his heart was just a tattered bag ready to explode.

I'll get you for this, D, he thought, swearing vengeance even as he slumped against the door anemically. The problem was, the door wouldn't open.

"What in blazes are they doing?!"

Circling around for a peek through one of the windows that had light spilling from it, he gasped in horror. There were four or five men lying on the floor, covered with blood. After turning away and taking a deep breath, he looked in again.

"What the hell?!"

Apparently the combination of exhaustion, fear, and anger had played a trick on his eyes. His men were all sitting there diligently maintaining their weapons.

When he opened the door and stepped in, the place was pervaded by a strange chill. Perhaps it was just his imagination, or maybe it was nerves, but everyone looked paler than usual.

"Something happen?" someone asked as they all noted his injuries.

"You could say that, I guess. D's still alive," he replied as he set his crossbow down on the table.

"We know," one of them replied.

It took a second for the warrior's eyes to bug at that remark.

“You know? How the hell is that?”

“Someone told us,” someone else said.

Why are these jokers bunching up around me?

“Yeah? Who?” Bazura asked them.

Shit! Jock’s got between me and my bow.

“Her.”

All their eyes were trained on something behind him.

When Bazura turned his gaze to follow the others’, his eyes were etched with the image of a woman in a white dress.

“Who—who are you?” he stammered.

The girl’s face was right in front of him. Her breath was cold and had the perfume of an autumn night.

“So, we meet again,” whispered a young lady he’d never seen before.

“We’ve got trouble!”

Sensing the urgency in the shouts of Cecile’s father, the sheriff raced back into the holding area.

In one cell, Lyle was clutching his chest.

“What’s the matter?” asked the lawman.

“The kid had a knife hidden on him. He was trying to use it to pick the lock when it suddenly slipped and he stabbed himself by mistake. The mayor’s gonna be furious!”

More than anything, it was the last remark that robbed the sheriff of his composure.

“Damn fool,” he muttered as he hastily unlocked the door, but the second he opened it, the wheezing figure on the floor pounced on the sheriff and drove his fingers into the lawman’s solar plexus.

“Well, I’m off,” said the boy.

“We’re counting on you. Rescue her, then the both of you better take off for someplace else.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll come back for you.”

Reaching through the bars to give the girl’s father a firm pat on the shoulder, Lyle then left the holding area. Of course, the sheriff had been locked in the cell previously occupied by the boy.

Stepping into the office, he grabbed a rapid-fire crossbow and about fifteen arrows and left with them strapped to his back.

“Hold on, Cecile! I swear I’m gonna rescue you,” the boy declared, hope and determination blazing fiercely in his heart.

Using the sheriff’s horse, it took him twenty minutes to get over to the same place as the previous night. It reeked of blood. Though he knew it’d been splashed there on purpose, Lyle still went pale.

“Cecile—are you okay?” he cried out as he hammered on the door like a man possessed.

“Lyle! What are you doing here?” a feeble and astonished voice replied through the door. “I’m begging you, just leave me be. If you fight the will of the village any more, they’re going to kill you and my father.”

“Then I’d rather be dead!” Lyle exclaimed as he tried to pry the lock off the door with a massive knife. “They give up one person to save somebody else. If that’s what I had to do to survive, I wouldn’t be able to hold my head up for the rest of my days. What do you think will happen if they do this every time a Noble shows up? I just can’t let this same thing keep happening to girls like you until all the Nobility have finally died out.”

“The sun’s gone down. The Noble will be coming soon. Hurry up and get out of here.”

“Don’t worry. D said it himself. You’ll be safe for two days. We’ll take your parents with us and get plenty far away from here.”

“We can’t. My mother and father would never be able to leave their home.”

“Don’t sweat it. I’ll make it easy enough for them to live elsewhere.”

The lock came off. When he shoved the door open, Cecile stood just beyond it, her face a complete mess. As Lyle approached his sweetheart, she took a step backward.

“I, I don’t . . .” the girl stammered. “What should I do?”

“For starters, let’s get out of here.”

Her warm body pressed against the grinning Lyle’s chest with an intensity that seemed to promise she’d never leave him again. As she hiccupped, Lyle gently stroked her back.

“Okay, let’s go!” he said, and then he turned around.

At any rate, he’d get Cecile out of town and come back tomorrow to fight the Noblewoman. He wasn’t too concerned about what would come after that. Though he couldn’t allow Cecile to be sacrificed, his own code of ethics as a villager wouldn’t allow him to just run off without taking some responsibility for what would happen in the village. He’d have to do something in return.

But it seemed he was a little too late.

Too much strength went into the hand he had resting on Cecile’s shoulder. Noticing this, the girl looked up and gasped in a low voice.

But well within hearing of that cry stood the woman in the blue dress. And the deep red blossom on her chest was surely the work of D’s needle.

II

“She’s back already?”

Pushing Cecile out of the way, Lyle readied the crossbow off his back. Once he’d switched off the safety mechanism, the hammer that’d strike the firing caps rose.

“You smell delectable,” the woman said as she licked her lips.

A blur of black streaked toward the woman’s face. The first arrow was snatched from the air by her hand. The second arrow was deflected.

The woman halted—Lyle's third shot had gone through the back of her hand. As she stared at it with disbelief, a steel arrow whizzed toward the left side of her chest, and this time it sank into her all the way to the fletching. Surely the woman hadn't been able to dodge it, since she'd appeared there despite the wound D had dealt her.

Reaching with her other hand for the arrow that'd just pierced her squarely between the eyes, the woman had no sooner taken hold of it than she collapsed on her back in the bushes.

"I did it! Those dark clouds are breaking!" Lyle exclaimed, putting all his feelings into his words as he gave a little jump for joy.

"It can't be . . . You mean . . . I'm saved . . . ?" Cecile mumbled absent-mindedly as the boy pushed her up onto his horse.

"We don't have to worry about anyone giving us any trouble now. Let's head back to town."

"Sure."

Even the fall breeze seemed warmed by their jubilation.

Astride the horse, the couple started down the road back to the village in high spirits.

As the rows of houses became dimly visible by the light of the moon, the girl said, "Someone's coming!"

But Lyle already had his gaze turned in the direction Cecile was pointing.

"No problem. We don't have a damn thing to worry about anymore. To the contrary, I should get a reward for this."

So full of confidence and joy, Lyle had forgotten something Cecile's father had pointed out while they were locked in the jail. To wit, the possibility that there might be a second Noble involved.

The shadowy rider that was approaching them halted.

"It's me. Lyle. I took care of the Noble," he declared triumphantly.

"That's great. Come with me," Bazura replied. He was accompanied by his

men.

†

Discovering the remains of the Noblewoman out in front of the sacrificial hut, D got off his horse. Not even glancing at the arrow that'd sealed her fate, he examined the wound left by his needle instead.

"So, she came out even though she hadn't fully recovered? Guess she must've been mighty hungry," a hoarse voice said, the latter remark coming in a sarcastic tone. It didn't believe that for a second.

"The legendary lady-in-waiting," was all that D said.

She'd gone after Cecile knowing full-well how weakened her condition had left her. The only possible explanation was that her mistress had ordered her to do so.

Entering the hut and confirming there was no one there, D then returned to the corpse. Pulling a dagger out of his coat, he pressed it between the woman's breasts. Sinking into her flesh like a weapon of another sort gliding into a woman's sheath, the blade gave off a glittering beam of light. No, it wasn't the blade—the glow spilled from within the woman's body.

The radiance adding new allure to his handsome features all the while, D split the woman open from her chest to her groin. The flesh buckled out with internal pressure, and in lieu of blood, a dazzling band of light was thrown up into the autumnal sky.

What had she been?

What D saw within her were a number of glass tubes filled with a crimson liquid that seemed to be blood and a chunk of machinery that resembled a heart. And beyond those things—oh, that was the source of the light. A tiny sun, and tens of millions of stars set in the blackness that surrounded it.

The light grew more brilliant.

Like an illusion, D leapt back a good fifteen feet. Before his eyes, the dazzling luminescence consumed the corpse. No doubt this was the result of it coming

into contact with the outside world. The extinction of this inner cosmos was so silent and peaceful it betrayed all expectations.

The whole world glowed with an impossibly pale light.

As one form faded away, a new silhouette came to the fore.

“We’ve met twice already,” said the girl with autumn tresses. “Let’s make the next time the last. I’ll be by the edge of the pond. Come before dawn. I have the young couple.”

Light scorched D’s retinas, and when it quickly dimmed again, there was no trace of the mistress of fall.

Having been notified of Lyle’s escape by the sheriff, the mayor gave the lawman a ninety-minute tongue lashing before returning to his den alone. As the sheriff was leaving, he said he’d try to get in touch with Bazura and join forces to search for the boy, but at any rate they wouldn’t be able to start until after daybreak.

“That little idiot. If he runs off with Cecile, it just means some other girl gets put out in her place,” the mayor grumbled bitterly as he sank back in his recliner.

However, his voice carried an unmistakable element of relief.

“Well, you just keep right on running. You’d best cross the Frontier to somewhere no one’s ever heard of, and make yourself a life together.”

“Is that what you think?” a voice like iron was heard to say from the feeble darkness that collected by the window. The den was only illuminated by a single small standing lamp.

“What, you?! You’re still alive?”

“The Noble’s dead,” D said tersely.

“Are you serious?”

“It was Lyle’s doing. Be sure he’s rewarded.”

“If what you say is true, of course he will be. After all, there’s no greater service he could possibly render to the village. Where is he? And do you have any

evidence of this?”

“Once day breaks, I’m sure he’ll be back. And don’t forget about Cecile and her parents, either.”

“Understood,” the mayor said, knowing in his heart of hearts what was right. “I’ll have to make amends to Helga as well. I do try to keep my job as a representative of the village in mind.”

The darkness beyond the window panes and that of the silhouette overlapped.

Once he knew the Vampire Hunter had left, the mayor slowly stretched out in his recliner, this time truly relaxing. This was the perfect occasion to open that special bottle of wine he’d been saving. Of course, the mayor didn’t realize it was a little too early to be celebrating.

III

The night was filled with scents—the smell of the grass and foliage just about to head into a long slumber, the aroma of fruit—and that of the moonlight. Perhaps even the rising atmosphere could be numbered among the scents. Billowing up from the waters of the half-drained pond, it was more like a miasma that choked the air and seemed to warp the very light of the moon.

A gnarled giant of a tree towered by the side of the pond, and among its roots a number of figures had gathered. There was no conversation. All kept their mouths shut. These shadowy figures were far removed from the raucous air that always seemed to spring up whenever people gathered. Though their hearts still beat, they weren’t breathing. And the blood that flowed through their veins was cold.

“Damn you—let us down!” an all-too-human voice shouted from a place that didn’t very well suit a human being—a spot halfway up the tree trunk.

Cecile and Lyle were hanging from one of the branches that protruded from the tree—and the cry had come from the boy, of course.

“You fucking stooges of the Nobility! You should be ashamed of yourselves!”

he shouted, but the men who'd died and risen again didn't even seem to notice.

Bazura alone glanced up at the pair, speaking in a tone that seemed to rise from the bowels of the earth, "Truth be known, we don't really need you. We only brought you along because Cecile threatened to bite her own tongue off if we laid a hand on you. We'll finish you off soon enough, so keep your pants on."

"In that case, tell me something. What's the purpose of bringing us all the way out here?"

The question was one he'd asked repeatedly while they were being brought there, and it had never garnered an answer.

"I suppose it can't hurt to tell you now. We're here to destroy D."

"What?! You mean he's not dead?"

"I killed him," Bazura said in a weird tone. "But apparently he came back to life. That's Vampire Hunter 'D' for you. He's no ordinary opponent."

"I'm not sure I follow you, but in that case, the battle's as good as decided. There's no way he'll be killed by a bunch of instant Nobility like you jerks. Give up already and go hide in a grave. Once day breaks, I'll find you and put you at peace."

"We might have some trouble if it was just us, but we also have her."

Bazura's words left Lyle shaken.

"Her? If you mean the Noble who bit the lot of you, I already took care of her."

The unvoiced laugh that followed shook Lyle as he hung in space.

"You like to boast of such piddling matters. I suppose I should punish you. After all, once D gets here, we're going to do away with you anyway."

Taking a few arrows from the quivers on their backs, Bazura and his men planted roughly a score of them in the ground directly below Lyle and Cecile with the points facing up. Then aiming his rapid-fire crossbow upward, he fired a shot at Cecile before Lyle could even try to dissuade him. The arrow sliced halfway through the rope supporting Cecile, and the girl let out a scream.

"Well, I suppose that'll do nicely. Now D has to race here and take all of us out

before the love of your life falls onto the arrowheads—that's the only way to save her."

"You dirty bastard! Go on and shoot me, too!"

"It wouldn't be much fun if I did that," Bazura said, laughing aloud for the first time.

"Lyle!" Cecile cried out.

Turning to the girl, he shouted back, "Don't talk! You'll only put more strain on the rope. Just hold still. Don't move. We'll get through this!"

"I don't care anymore," Cecile said softly. "Anything's better than dying back in that hut. And I've got you by my side. If I fall, I don't want you to grieve for me."

Lyle couldn't scold her for talking anymore. And though her words showed her resignation to this fate, no one could blame her. Twice set out to die, the sacrifice would've undoubtedly been a far crueler fate than to be run through quickly. The boy had done all he could possibly do.

"Don't worry. I'll be right behind you. After I've taken care of these bastards and the other Noble that seems to be around, that is."

"What a lovely sentiment," Bazura laughed mockingly from below. "You'd best pray D gets here before that comes to pass. Because that's what we were chosen for."

At that point, there was an owl hoot from the road sloping down to the pond—a signal from a lookout that'd been posted there.

"Here he comes. Everyone into position!"

At what truly sounded like a command from a former mercenary, the shadowy figures pulled heavy masks up over their noses and mouths and melted into the darkness.

The form of the horse and rider was at the crest of the slope, shimmering with moonlight. Without the slightest pause they cantered down.

Lyle didn't even think about shouting out a warning. Though Bazura had vanished without saying anything to him, he couldn't be sure the man wouldn't put a steel arrow through Cecile at any moment.

When D reached the foot of the hill, black shapes came down around him from all sides. But they weren't attackers. The things that fell around him broke open easily, sending a powerful stench into the night air. Garlic extract.

Ordinarily, Bazura and the others would've been writhing from the smell since they'd been made servants of the Nobility. But the heavy masks they wore must've helped to prevent that.

D raced ahead at full speed. Suddenly, his body and that of his mount were thrown forward. The tips of spears jutting from the ground had jabbed into his horse's belly.

Midair, there were flashes from D's left hand. Perhaps he'd seen the locations from which the foul-smelling packages had been hurled.

Men who'd been pierced in various spots by rough wooden needles appeared from behind the trees, weapons glittering in the hands of all as they charged at D.

Keeping his left hand over his nose and mouth all the while, D met their attack. All he had was the blade in his right hand—but every time it flashed out, it easily deflected whistling iron spears in flight or sent longswords falling to the ground along with the hands that gripped them. There were about ten men, and running them all through the heart or taking off their heads didn't even take ten seconds.

"Incredible! Absolutely incredible!" Lyle exclaimed. He couldn't help but shout at the exquisite display of skill by moonlight.

As D shot a quick glance up at him, an arrow shot out of the ground and severed Cecile's rope. The girl plummeted, her screams trailing behind her.

While D stood motionless, a silvery flash shot up from beneath his feet. As he took it through the solar plexus, D drove his own sword into the earth and lifted his left hand. He caught the falling Cecile, and a groan that would've left most covering their ears rose from beneath his blade and Bazura sent black dirt flying everywhere as he sat up. D's sword had pierced the man through the back of the neck and gone right through his heart.

Pulling off his mask with trembling hands, Bazura gasped, "You . . . you damn freak . . . Even with my blade in you, you stabbed me right back . . ."

With D's sword still stuck in his neck, Bazura ambled away. The vitality of this vampire was a thing to be feared.

Though D should've given chase, he fell to his knees where he was. His Noble blood had reacted to the stifling aroma of garlic that wafted around him.

The rapid-fire crossbow was raised.

Lyle still hung high in the air.

But it was a second later that Bazura's silhouette lurched unexpectedly. The blank-propelled arrow jabbed into the ground, and his headless corpse toppled forward.

Behind him, still poised with her shoddy longsword from home at the end of its downward stroke, was the raggedly breathing Helga.

"I guess that settles it, doesn't it?" Lyle said as he returned to the living room after putting Cecile to bed, but only the old woman nodded at his words.

"So it would seem. You did a fine job yourself, you know."

Caught in a look of admiration, Lyle rubbed the back of his head bashfully.

"Well then, here's the money you were promised." Pulling a rough little pouch out from under the table, the crone passed it to D, saying, "You'll be going soon, I take it. I sure will miss you."

"You can't!" Lyle interjected hastily. "When I was talking about things being settled, I meant with Bazura and the first Noblewoman. There's still another major player out there."

"Relax. She won't be coming around any more," Helga told him.

"How do you know that?"

"Just a hunch. But then again, I'm the one who called D here in the first place. Trust me."

Up until then, D had been leaning back against the wall by the door like a winter's night given shape.

"I'll be leaving here tomorrow," he said simply.

“Hey! Wait a second—”

Ignoring the seriously agitated Lyle, the old woman said in a cheery tone, “In that case, maybe I should get you to take me with you. At any rate, I can’t have much time left. I suppose that rather than staying here to decay all alone, traveling with you and seeing all sorts of things before I die would be a tad better. Oh, don’t even bother saying it. I’ll just follow along on my own anyway. And when I pass away, you won’t need to do a blessed thing for me.”

“The old woman will die, but you won’t.”

Lyle didn’t comprehend the meaning of D’s words.

“What’s that you say?” the crone remarked, raising an eyebrow.

“You said you were going to divine the Noble’s location, didn’t you? What was the result?”

“It was—” the old woman began to reply, but she quickly held her tongue and stared at D.

However, she seemed to give in right away. Turning her eyes to the floor, she continued, “—right in this house.”

“I swam down to the ruins,” D said without ever breaking his pose.

“Is that a fact?” Helga replied.

Lyle rose to his feet in astonishment.

For the first time, old Helga’s voice had been that of a young woman. Strangely enough, the very crone it had come from had her own eyes wide with surprise.

“Wha—what in the world was that?” the boy stammered.

“You saw it, I assume. My ‘abode.’ But I thought I’d melted it completely. Were you able to figure it out just from the wreckage?” she said, her words and the old woman’s both coming from the same mouth.

Not replying, D asked instead, “Why did you appear now? And why was the handmaiden in the blue dress with you?”

“My father crafted the ‘abode’ for me. Actually, it would be more accurate to call it a ‘world’. So long as I remained inside it, I could live forever in a world of light. The blood synthesizers worked perfectly, too. A century ago, my father

foresaw the fate of the Nobility and constructed that so I might live on without anyone ever knowing. However, ultimately, I was unable fight my blood. After more than a hundred years of denying myself, I finally couldn't restrain the urge to drink human blood any longer."

As she spoke with the stoic voice of the night, the old woman was deathly pale. She was finally learning the truth. And it was being told to her by herself.

"That's ridiculous . . . Utterly ridiculous. If that were true, why would you call D here?" Lyle asked in a tone of mingled perplexity and fear.

Turning to the boy, she countered, "I—I didn't do anything. I was just nervous."

"But it wasn't me that called you here. It was this 'world,'" the crone said to the Hunter, thumping her chest coldly. "The world my father crafted was far too intricate, too ingenious. At some point, my 'world' knit itself into the human 'world,' developed a will of its own, and began to 'live.' Why, it even got a heart. And that was why it formed Larna—my lady-in-waiting—and set everything in motion. She was true to the spirit of the original right to the very end."

"D—I was . . ."

"Do you understand, D?" asked the youthful voice. "In order to destroy me, you'll have to cut down this tired old 'world.' There's no other way to subject me to your blade. Inside her, I will live on forever, D!"

A flash of light came straight down.

"Perhaps I'd have been better off never meeting you," the old woman practically mumbled as a white line streaked down her forehead and along her nose. "I wanted to live with you from the first moment I laid eyes on you. I ordered the rabble to slay you so I might drink your blood a moment before your death and make you my servant—no, I never actually planned to make a servant of you. At the very least, I wanted to walk with you once through the autumn fields. It was my favorite season, after all."

The band of light turned her humble living room into a shimmering world.

"D, I just wanted—" said the crone.

“D, I simply wished—” said the young woman.

The two voices overlapped, and a second later, old Helga’s body split lengthwise.

D saw inside. The sun shone brilliantly over fall woods ablaze with leaves of red and gold, while a fragrant breeze carried the scent of apples and plums. And the light enveloped everything. In this scene there stood a girl in a white dress. Her hair was light green.

It was impossible to tell whether it was the voice of the old woman or the young that finished speaking in the end, saying, “—to go away with you.”

And then the girl split down the middle and dissolved into the endless white light.

Legend of
the War Fiends

A WARRIOR MET ALONG THE WAY

CHAPTER 1

I

The castle challenged the heavens. Although the way it had been constructed—by hollowing out a jagged mountain and pouring countless tons of liquid concrete—was startling, the reason the terrified scientists had their eyes open as wide as they possibly could was because a massive nuclear reactor set dozens of floors below the castle was still running.

“Yes, but just where is all that power going?” one member of the survey team asked as he tightened his grip on a garlic flower.

Not an iota of the energy was devoted to illuminating the castle or even opening and closing the doors of this massive structure that’d been carved from a whole mountain. It would probably take them more than a decade to learn every detail of this palace.

“When did the Nobility abandon this castle?” another scientist asked.

“Two thousand years ago.”

“And you mean to say the nuclear reactor has been going nonstop ever since?”

“According to the records kept by their monitoring devices, yes.”

“In that case, you should be able to check what that power line is supposed to feed into.”

“No, that’s the only information that’s been lost.”

“And you think that might’ve been intentional?”

“The odds are pretty good.”

“How much juice does the nuclear reactor generate?”

“Fifty million megawatts an hour.”

The scientists fell silent. They were numbed by the thought of the vast energy that’d been pouring into this unknown thing for the last two thousand years—or

perhaps even longer.

Terror then hovered over the group like an aurora. What was the thing? Why had it been necessary to hide its existence while enormous amounts of power were fed into it for two millennia?

It was two days later that they came up with an answer, when the linguist who'd been holed up in the library located in the castle's annex madly deciphering ancient documents of the Nobility appeared before a scientist who'd stepped out onto the castle's observation deck to enjoy the cool summer breeze.

Going over to the edge of the observation deck, the linguist peered down. There was nothing there. A foreboding precipice that was sheer and smooth, the castle walls dropped straight down for more than three thousand feet. The outline of a distant mountain chain curtained by fog and twilight caught the linguist's eye, and he finally felt calm again.

"They chose a hell of a place to make a hell of thing, didn't they," the scientist said. "This isn't merely a mountain stronghold; it's an impenetrable fortress."

"Precisely," the young linguist replied bluntly. "As you say, this was something exceptional. It's been here for roughly seven thousand years."

"Well, isn't that something," the scientist remarked with admiration, but he wasn't able to fully conceal his feelings that a mere seven millennia in and of itself wasn't all that amazing.

"For the five millennia from its construction to its abandonment, the castle was at war continuously."

"What's that you say?"

"I suppose you've already seen how the castle is equipped. The whole place is bristling with armaments like a veritable porcupine."

That remark cut the scientist to the quick. If the government back in the Capital ever saw the countless weapons of legend to be found here, they'd have the whole castle locked up tight. Needless to say, there were the basic armaments such as neutron missiles, atomic cannons, and lasers, but judging merely by the remaining structures, the place had almost certainly been equipped with dimensional vortex cannons, weather disruptors, energy lines,

and other weapons of mass destruction. It was a level of fortification inconceivable in an ordinary castle of the Nobility.

"According to local folklore and what I've managed to decipher from the scant records kept in the castle's archives, this was the center of an ancient battlefield twenty-five hundred miles in diameter—a place known as 'The Armageddon Zone.' And the conflict was an extremely personal one."

"Personal, eh?" the scientist said, involuntarily looking down.

As if on command, the fog broke like a curtain opening on the ravaged earth. An expanse of reddish brown soil without a single spot of green, the desolate scene would probably be enough to trouble anyone's soul. Even though he only suspected that was the result of a nuclear war that'd showered the area with copious amounts of radioactive material, what the linguist had pointed out was undoubtedly the brutal truth.

"There was another family that was, in a manner of speaking, sworn enemies of the master of this fortress for several millennia. Currently, neither their names nor their crests are known to us, but there can be no mistaking the fact that they did exist. Receiving no assistance from the rest of the Nobility, these two families fought for five thousand years. And then one day, they suddenly vanished. Many Nobles have been wiped out without a trace, but this castle remains, and even now its reactor is feeding energy into something."

"And what is this 'something'?"

"I don't know. It's certainly not the weapons we've discovered."

"I wonder whatever became of the other family. Since this castle remains, its master must've won the conflict, right?"

"We can't even begin to guess."

As the linguist lit a cigarette, the scientist eyed it enviously. The Capital did an extremely poor job of distributing them.

"Care for one?"

While he didn't want to add to the other man's sense of superiority, the scientist thanked the linguist anyway and took a yellow cigarette from him,

asking him for a light at the same time. Filling his lungs deeply with smoke, he experienced a moment of supreme bliss. The ebbing of his tension actually gave rise to the most extraordinary thought.

“You think it was eventually settled?” the scientist said, but as he did, he felt a chill run down his spine. One of the possible answers was the last thing he wanted to hear.

The other man couldn’t even take that into consideration.

“I don’t know, either. If it did reach a conclusion, then the fact that this castle survived would suggest that their foes lost, but since neither the records nor any other documents make mention of it, I can’t say for certain.”

“In other words—”

“Yes. There’s a very strong possibility the conflict was never ultimately resolved.”

The scientist held his tongue. A specific thought arose in his brain with frightening clarity. It was supported by the Nobles’ nuclear reactor that even now continued its tireless activity deep within the earth and by the vast wasteland that surrounded the mountain fortress.

Looking at the linguist’s face and finding a hint of anticipation there, he decided not to indulge the other man any further. As far as the Nobility and their civilization was concerned, there was an unwritten yet ironclad rule: The less you know, the better.

The linguist knew it, too. The major difference between the scientist and him was the youthfulness of the latter. Although he was still free to choose whether or not to discuss his thoughts, his youthful overconfidence was so strong that it threatened to make him burst.

“What probably happened—” he began to say as prudently as possible.

Steeling himself, the scientist took a long drag on his cigarette.

Just then, a strange sensation traveled up through their feet.

The gaze of the youthful linguist shot to the scientist. But the scientist had his eyes shut. Suddenly, the linguist realized that it was dusk.

The observation deck faced west. The vermilion-tinged outlines of a distant mountain struck at his heart with a wave of surprise. He got the feeling that the entire page of history penned at this castle was stained the very same hue.

When the scientist's parched lips blew out a protracted cloud of purple smoke, a now unmistakable rumbling in the earth and the sounds of destruction rose from below them. And then—there was a roaring laugh.

II

From off to his left he heard the whistle of a spear thrust. Though the drive came with such speed the very air seemed to bend around it, the figure in black didn't seem to make any special moves, but merely grabbed the spear just behind the tip with his left hand. As the spearman stumbled forward with an incredulous cry, he was met head-on by the casual swipe of a sword that dispatched him before the ink-black figure surveyed his remaining opponents.

There was a wind—a winter wind that seemed to make every cheek it buffeted swell to twice its normal size. And to the men, it seemed as if the same wind was protecting the other man. An outline like a wintry night crystallized, but with all the resulting sparkle crushed from winter's true form. His face was gorgeous, and his coat absolutely mesmerizing as it billowed out elegantly.

We're all gonna die. That's the price we'll pay for trying to kill a man so beautiful and taking his gold.

"Give me some room, damn it!" one noticeably short man growled as he stepped out onto the frozen ground. It seemed like he was ready to make his move, but suddenly a pair of black wings opened noisily on his back. They weren't organic. Rather, they'd been crafted from animal hide stretched over a skeleton of wire and wood.

Flapping his wings before the beautiful butcher, the man flitted into the air like some sort of unholy bird. The wings must've utilized a compact but powerful motor, and the flesh and bones of the man himself had to be awfully light.

His shouts rained down from the sky. "I'm gonna go after him, too. All of you

hit him at once!”

And then the winged man rapidly climbed another fifty yards. That was the kind of altitude he’d need to launch his attack.

Naked steel glittering in their hands, his cohorts charged the butcher. They had no way of knowing that on his way down, the airborne figure had reduced his speed.

The second all the forms fused into a single mass, the bird man began to climb again with a brown rain pouring down from his chest.

Twice, cries rang out—once when the liquid made contact, and once more when the soaked bodies began to dissolve with terrifying speed. They’d been showered with a powerful acid.

When the bird man dropped thirty feet and turned for a look, none of the forms on the ground resembled a human being any longer. Descending another thirty feet and changing direction, he gasped aloud.

One of the figures who should’ve melted down into a pile of meat and bones had just stood up straight. Even from his present height, the heavensent beauty of the countenance now peering up at him was unmistakable.

It’s him! There’s white smoke coming off his coat—don’t tell me that shielded him from my rain of death!

Eyes glittering with malice, the bird man gained altitude. Though his opponent might’ve cheated death once, no lowly creature on the ground could possibly escape the speed and murderous intent of one who ruled the sky.

“No way in hell are you getting away!” snarled the bird man.

But before he could beat his wings to dive in an assault from the heavens, it looked as if the figure of beauty on the ground rose with exquisite weightlessness. In order to ensure his foe was now slain, the bird man had intended to swoop down to a mere ten feet above his opponent’s head. He never would’ve thought the figure in black would rise to his altitude as he was about to rain liquid death on him. The instant the man felt the silvery flash touch the top of his head, he realized the second round of screams that’d come from his compatriots hadn’t been prompted by the liquid death, but rather by their

opponent's swordplay.

As his body continued to glide through the air, its path was suddenly blocked by a figure that resembled a small mountain. Just as it looked like they were about to collide, the bird man split in two. A bloody mist spattered the giant as the pieces passed him on either side. After angling down through the hazy white of winter and slamming into the ground, neither half moved again.

While it was unclear whether or not he knew the massive individual who'd intruded on the deadly battle, the gorgeous figure silently turned his back on him to walk away.

"Wait just a second!" a voice boomed from ten feet in the air. It came from a pair of thick lips and a face larger than most children.

The figure in the black coat turned around impassively.

"Sweet lord!" the giant said with an appreciative whistle, his wide eyes going even wider. "My, but you are one good-looking fella! What do you go by, anyway?"

"D," said the shadowy figure.

"Wow, that kinda has a sad sound to it, but it's a good name. I'm—"

As he pondered, he twisted a great neck that was thick as a tree trunk.

"Come to think of it, I guess I don't have one," he laughed.

Heaven and earth seemed to quake at the sound.

Giants weren't completely unheard-of in this world. In the western Frontier there was a village of forty-foot-tall Cyclopes spawned by the Nobility. However, this nameless Goliath was extremely ordinary in appearance, clad from the neck down in a purple cloth that looked like velvet curtains, and at the end of the pole he had over his shoulder hung a cloth bundle that looked big enough to hold five grown men. A giant traveler was indeed a rare thing.

The smile didn't fade from the giant's face, no matter how long he stood there. D turned around.

"Hey! Wait a second!" the giant cried, hastening after the Hunter. The ground shook with every thud of his feet.

As he followed after D, he pointed to the earthen mound over which he'd come and said, "I was sleeping nice and peaceful-like back there. Not only did you and your playmates go and wake me up, but look what a mess you made of my only set of clothes. I'll never get the stink of blood out of them. You've got to take some responsibility, buster!"

"And how would I do that?" D asked without even turning to face the man.

"Smashing one or two of those creeps into a pulp would've satisfied me, but you already took care of them all. So that only leaves me one alternative."

Apparently the giant was unfamiliar with the concept of subterfuge.

Not even bothering to take the package of belongings from the end of his pole, he swung it straight down at D's head like he was working with a hoe. The bludgeon was a foot and a half thick and over fifteen feet long. Judging by the jagged condition of either end, it was probably safe to say this was a log that hadn't been cut with any edged implement but rather snapped off with sheer strength.

Its impact shook the earth, giving off a tremendous boom and sending cracks racing out in all directions—but the figure in black walked right by the fissures in the earth without the least concern.

"Oh, damn it!" the giant shouted in dismay.

Pulling his club out of the rift, he hastened after D.

The figure in black advanced across the quaking ground without flinching.

"Damn you!"

This time it looked like the giant was going to bring down another blow from above, but he easily changed the direction of the bark-covered log for a horizontal swipe.

D moved with the flow of the log. Riding the wind caused by the great bludgeon and arcing up, he appeared unsteady for a second before bounding to the giant's chest.

"Huh?" the giant cried, but before he could even get the words out he took a hard blow to the base of the neck from the still-sheathed sword and was

knocked down.

The spot where D landed again still reverberated from the resulting crash.

“You’re pretty strong, aren’t you?” the giant conceded with clear admiration, though his face still held a grimace. “I’m no match for you. Okay, I give. I give already!”

And then he got right up, with blades of grass falling from his back—this after taking a blow from D.

“So, where are you headed anyway?” he asked, but D was already sixty feet away, mounting his cyborg horse where it’d been nibbling the grass.

His black finger indicated the narrow road that ran nearby.

“Oh, that’s perfect. I’m headed north, too. At this time of year, I’m sure it’s covered far and wide with icy blooms.”

Apparently the giant was something of a poet.

“Say, why don’t we travel together? They say the company makes the trip, and I just love having someone stronger than me around. Makes it that much safer if we’re attacked by bandits, you know.”

He was also honest.

D advanced on his horse without saying a word. Why the young man hadn’t done away with this person who’d intended to kill him was the real question.

“Come on. Wait up! Just give me a second, would you?”

Following him as far as the road, the giant then apparently gave up. With arms akimbo he shouted, “I know we’ll probably never meet again, so I should at least give you my name, pretty boy. It just came to me. I’m known as Dynus. I’ll thank you not to forget it. Dynus, you hear? Dynus the wanderer!”

His voice trailed off into the distance. By the time it faded completely, the rider in black had disappeared down the frozen road. The flavor of winter was strong that afternoon.

That was how D and Dynus came to meet.

III

Snow had long since replaced the rain. The tiny white dreams that fell in disarray from the leaden sky made the sun show its dazzling smile for the first time in days. Even the village of Schlad that D was calling on belonged to the white world.

Though he took a room at the only inn in town, it wasn't because he planned on being there for any length of time. Rather, it was because the fatigue of traveling by day had caught up with him.

A dhampir's biorhythms peaked between sunset and daybreak. Although traveling was usually done by night, everyone knew that nocturnal journeys on the Frontier meant constant encounters with supernatural beasts and demonic creatures. A perfect example was the survey group that was traveling around the northwestern portion of the Frontier five years earlier. In the two hours following sunset they encountered five ghouls, a pair of demons that could suck the skeleton out of a man, a carnivorous blob, and a female specter—and half the party was lost in the process. D probably wasn't the only one who'd rather take to the road by day instead of fighting through the night.

Lowering the blinds to manufacture his own darkness, D soon fell asleep. After waking about four hours later, he went outside.

The sun was down. Night air on the Frontier brimmed with the aura of nature. The strength that oozed from the soil, the invigoration that billowed from the trees, the vitality of the beasts of the field—for those who'd been born with one accursed parent, these things formed an irreplaceable fount of life.

D walked quietly down the white streets. All sounds seemed to be absorbed by the snow. Although it was only about supper time, there were few people to be seen on the roads—snow was a perfect cover for certain dangerous creatures. Pedestrians carried sticks that they jabbed into the snow periodically, and about one time in ten the snow would tremble in response.

D entered a tavern. Doubling as a restaurant, the place swirled with the aromas of meat and liquor and cigarettes. The most dazzling glow in the whole rustic establishment came from the women.

Someone noticed D. Their coquettish chatter died instantly, and they concentrated gazes that beggared description on him. Even after he'd taken a seat at the end of the counter, the din failed to return.

Shutting his gaping mouth, the bartender with the handlebar mustache shook his head as if to rid himself of some thought and slowly ambled down to D.

"What'll it be?" he asked. His voice seemed to have sprouted wings.

"Wine."

"I'll give you a glass of the best on the house, my treat," the bartender said in a dim tone. "And once you've had your drink, I'll thank you to leave. With you here, the whole joint will be out of whack."

He gave the young man a tin cup full of vermilion liquid. When D touched the drink to his lips, a sound like a moan of passion shook the room.

"Would you folks mind behaving yourselves?" the bartender shouted. Apparently he was the owner.

And with that, the spell was broken. The women went back to stroking the bald heads of the nearest dirty old men or holding hands with the younger ones.

It was just then that the door opened. The reaction this time was slightly different from when D had entered. Fright and confusion—these emotions replaced any drunkenness in the gazes that followed the girl who came in carrying a wicker basket and walked all the way to the bar with her doleful countenance aimed at the floor.

"The usual?" the bartender asked in a kindly tone.

"Please," the young woman said with an equally modest nod. For some reason, she simply refused to meet the eyes that were trained on her. Her short red hair, the simple blouse and down coat, and even the long skirt were all those of an ordinary country girl.

"What's the matter, Raya?" one of the young men said to her in a voice dripping with scorn. He was drunk. "Without an escort tonight, are we? Am I right, your majesty?"

"Knock it off," the guy next to him said, giving his elbow a tug.

Another friend of theirs said, “What happened to your big bad retainers, eh?”

“Hell, they don’t scare us!” the first barked.

There were three of them, all told—and each had the build and the look of a local hell-raiser.

“Would you knock it off already?” the bartender told them as he gave the girl a green bottle. “Don’t go starting trouble with Raya. It’s not like she called those characters here.”

“How are we supposed to know that?!” one of the three shouted back as he wildly waved a liquor bottle. “Three guys without any connection to her whatsoever show up one day and decide to stay. And when a local boy just grabs her ass a little bit, he gets both hands torn off at the wrist. Then someone who goes out there to collect on a debt—and gets a little mouthy—gets his bottom jaw ripped off and his tongue plucked out to boot. Is that the sort of shit a complete stranger would do?! It sounds more like bodyguards or loyal retainers protecting their darling princess.”

“Maybe, but from what I hear, both Corda and Adinas were in the wrong. Didn’t they both do or say something so bad Raya was trying to get away from them? So when they went after her to finish what they’d started, anyone who owed her family a favor would want to do something to help her, right?” said the bartender.

“So you think it’s fine someone’s gone and done that kind of damage to your fellow villagers?”

“Hell, everyone’s always going on about what a little saint she is for taking care of that rummy of a father of hers, so they can’t see squat through their rose-colored glasses. She’s not as good as everyone makes out! Three men, I’m telling you. She’s got three of them.”

“Thank you, sir,” the girl said in a feeble tone before turning around.

A distasteful air hung in the tavern, and knowing just who bore the brunt of it, one of the young men said, “Sheesh. Let’s find a change of scenery,” as all three got up. Throwing some gold coins down on the table, they then went out of their way to stomp out of the tavern as loudly as possible.

“Worthless bastards. They’re the dregs of the damn village,” the owner grumbled as a single silver coin was slipped into his hand. By the time he realized what it was for, the figure in black was casually heading out through the door.

D turned left—back the same way he’d come. His face had a dim glow from the light bouncing off of the snow. No matter how gorgeous, every face had at least one part of it that served as a reminder of the human way of life, but the only impression one got from this young man was that of pure beauty. Even under the closest examination, it would always make things such as his conversing with others, or eating, or sleeping, seem like activities belonging to a completely separate world. Even as he walked away, not a trace of the tavern’s atmosphere remained on him. He was poetry in motion.

After a minute or two, D came to a corner. Towering warehouses stretched off blackly into the distance. Every village had a place like this for storing things such as food and agricultural equipment.

As he was about to go straight, he heard a jumbled mash of two kinds of voices.

“Please, let go of me! Stop it!”

“Quit your fussing and just come with us.”

“Don’t be so stingy with your goodies. You must’ve let them give it to you, right?”

The figure in black kept right on walking. But five steps later he halted. The voices had undergone an incredible change.

“Wh—who the hell are you guys?” one voice stammered.

“And when in blazes—?”

The sounds that followed were something no one’s ears but D’s would’ve caught—the crunch of bones snapping, the sound of organs rupturing.

Before the long, thin scream had finished trailing through the air, D started walking again. He was a shadow with no relation to the events of this world.

When he’d gone about fifteen feet, a girl cried out in a distressed tone, “Someone! Anyone! Come quick!”

Sounding like the kind of farm girl you might encounter anywhere, it was the same young woman who'd left the tavern out of embarrassment.

As if caught in a whirlwind, D spun around.

Right after turning the corner, he saw several figures hanging around the door to one of the warehouses. One stood a head taller than the girl. He wasn't one of the young toughs from the bar.

When D had closed to within six feet, the man turned and looked at him. A tinge of amazement raced through the man's nondescript features, and the girl had a chance to slip free of his grasp.

"Help!" her round face cried as she clung to D's chest. "Terrible things are happening to those folks inside. You've got to stop it!"

D didn't even look at the girl. His field of view was occupied by the man who asked in a rusty voice, "What are you?"

Though the man was attired for work in the fields, an unearthly air inconceivable for any true farmer wafted about him.

Not answering, D advanced—and the man stepped back without making a sound.

"You lousy bastard . . ." a voice groaned.

The man's body sank unexpectedly, but not like he'd just sat down. Rather, he disappeared from his ankles to his waist. No, actually he sank down into the snow right up to his head. But even though there'd been a lot of snow recently, the pile couldn't have been more than a foot and a half deep. Strangely enough, it seemed he must've melted away.

D's gaze was drawn to the entrance to the warehouse. One of the door panels was open.

The interior was packed with darkness, and a chilling cacophony surrounded D. But he'd probably already known to expect that.

The contents of the warehouse consisted of more than just the tractors and farm implements that'd been shoved into one corner. The wooden crates that filled the darkness were all cages fitted with iron bars. Within them, eyes glowed

like red pools of blood atop furry legs or root-like tentacles while groans that might've been hexes or curses were vented. These were supernatural beasts and insects to be shipped to the Capital. Their uses varied. Speed spiders for feeding the poisonous insects that cured contagious diseases, doppelganger lizards that could be turned into guard beasts for a whole household through one simple operation—these were the kinds of creatures usually considered fit for nothing but slaughter out in the wild. Needless to say, even now they remained extremely dangerous.

On a fairly wide patch of ground in front of the towering heap of cages, three figures lay face down—the young men from earlier. From the low groans escaping their lips, they hadn't lost their lives yet. They were probably fortunate to have gotten off with having their limbs left horribly twisted.

Giving the youths just a quick glance, D then turned his face to a higher spot.

"Watch yourselves," said the voice of the one from outside. "Even I didn't notice this guy as he was approaching. What's more, just having him near me made me flinch. He's something from another world."

"Is it him?" another one of them asked. It was a bizarre voice, seeming to come from both above and below. Anyone trying to locate him by voice alone was likely to quickly succumb to confusion, perhaps even forgetting about where they themselves were.

"No," said the third and most solemn of the voices. "This is someone else. However—this one just might be even greater than the other . . ."

"Impossible!"

"There are fearsome characters out in the wide world. That much I've always known, but when you actually see one in the flesh . . ."

The third speaker actually sounded quite impressed.

"We'll introduce ourselves. I'm Duran," he said. The voice was that of the man from outside.

"Very well. I'm Sabey."

"Understood. I'm known as Crumb."

This wasn't done to be nice—each and every voice had a ring of hostility to it. And yet, they didn't let the tiniest sign betray their presence.

Then, for the first time, they showed some sign of being upset. D had just spun around on his heel. Could any act have matched that for sheer discourtesy—or for daring?

Having ascertained that the three young men were still alive, he was finished. After that, it would simply be a matter of summoning the villagers—that was reasoning that D alone could follow.

As if to show him his error, a black figure dropped down from directly above him.

"Stop!" Sabey called out, but he was either too early or too late.

A glint of white split the darkness lit till now solely by the light off the snow, and something thudded to the ground on either side of D.

"You're good," groaned the one who'd identified himself as Crumb. However, that voice came from the piece that'd fallen about six feet to D's right—the man from the waist up. From the waist down, he lay to D's left.

"My turn next," Sabey said, his voice falling from the ceiling as he made no further efforts to conceal his presence.

"Oh—don't do it!" Crumb's upper body shouted.

"Hurry up and get out of here," Sabey snapped back at him at the same time the sounds of destruction filled the entire warehouse.

Each and every cage had broken open in unison. No external force had undone the bolts or snapped the high-voltage lines—that had been done by the mindless fury of the accursed creatures within them.

“Very well, then—go, my little friends!”

At Sabey’s bidding, the bizarre monsters charged the gorgeous silhouette that stood there motionless. Anyone familiar with their respective species would’ve been startled by the ordinarily unimaginable swiftness and agility the beasts displayed.

But even more amazing was the speed that far exceeded theirs. The din of flesh and bone being hewn sounded like a single continuous sound. D moved in a circle with a diameter no wider than his own shoulders. Each flash of his blade dealt lethal wounds to several supernatural creatures, and after four glittering strokes the assault was at an end.

A hoarse and haughty laugh came from someone they didn’t even know was there. To the contrary, the impressions that radiated down from the ceiling seemed to indicate the three adversaries were so tense they might not have even noticed the laughter.

“Unbelievable . . .”

“Damned freak . . .”

And even these remarks weren’t muttered until they’d drawn several breaths.

With the stink of blood beginning to pervade the chill air of the warehouse, the figure in black headed back to the entrance without a sound.

As he was about to cross the threshold again, Duran’s voice called out, “Wait—at least give us your name.”

“D,” he replied succinctly before stepping outside.

“Those guys weren’t too shabby,” said a hoarse voice from the vicinity of the Hunter’s left hip. The same voice that’d laughed earlier. “The first one was in a great position to cut you. Ordinarily, that only would’ve been the start of things, you know. The second was a ‘beast master’—but he’s capable of a lot more than what we saw. He was just testing the waters. And the third is the scariest of the bunch.”

D looked at the girl who was standing right in front of him.

“All three of them will live. But you should get someone out here.”

And with those words he walked past her.

“Please wait. What happened to the other three?” a doleful voice inquired.

“Are they connected to your family?”

“Not at all. About two weeks ago they suddenly came to my house. And—”

Saying no more, D continued to walk away.

“Please. I’d like you to get them to leave. At this rate, Papa and I won’t be able to go on living in the village much longer!” she said.

But the young man had taken a left at the corner, and her words never reached him.

DRAWN TO THE GIRL

CHAPTER 2

I

Blue light was just beginning to spill through the gaps in the blinds over the windows facing east when a monocled gentleman called on D's room.

Through the door the Hunter asked, "What's your business?"

While the voice froze him in his tracks, the man replied, "Brewer's the name. Just a little while ago, I heard some talk about you at the tavern. I suppose the sheriff's done with you by now. You'd best open up," he ordered haughtily.

There was no reply.

Clearing his throat, Brewer then changed his tack. The voice that spilled from between his thick lips was coaxing.

"I'm sorry, please forgive my rudeness. The fact of the matter is, I'm a recruiter. The girl you're said to have helped—Raya, was it? She's already been paid six thousand dalas to take employment in the Capital. I even have the contract I drew up with her father. However, when I came back a week ago, I find three strange farmhands there who simply won't let me have the girl. Worse yet, they've gone and left no less than five young men with all sorts of broken bones. As for Raya, she's not shaking her head and refusing to leave her father or anything. I was at my wits' end when I happened to hear about you, and I prayed the whole time I was running over here. So, what say you? You'll be handsomely rewarded. Would you be good enough to somehow deliver Raya to me . . . Mister D?"

The last part of that was one of the aces he'd been holding. Not a soul in the village knew the Hunter's name.

There was no reply.

Looking quite dissatisfied, the recruiter fiddled a bit with his sharp little bow tie before saying, "Actually, I had the pleasure of seeing you from a distance once a

long time ago. That's when I learned your name and what you looked like. The dashing Vampire Hunter 'D,' famed throughout the Frontier. My, it truly is an honor to have another chance to meet you. I would appreciate it if you'd open up."

Again, no answer came.

Brewer went to his second ace.

Lowering his voice and bringing his mouth closer to the door, he said, "While I may be a bit imprudent, I certainly wouldn't ask the greatest Hunter on earth to involve himself in mundane matters. Mister D, the girl—Raya—actually has the shadow of the Nobility hanging over her."

A minute later, Brewer sat at a beat-up table across from D. His mouth hung open—a natural enough response—and it didn't close for quite some time, as if leaving it that way were a form of courtesy.

"You mentioned the Nobility, didn't you?" asked the Hunter.

"Yes," the man replied, his jaw finally moving.

The horribly beautiful gaze remained locked on him.

"I needn't lie or conceal anything; not from anyone as stunning as yourself. Seeing you up close is almost enough to make another man melt like butter, you know. The government official in the Capital who wants the girl is actually a researcher studying the Nobility, and on checking some ancient documents, he discovered that she definitely has Noble blood in her. As a result, I was hired to bring her back in the utmost secrecy."

"What's the name of your employer?"

Brewer smoothly replied with a ridiculously long name.

"And where's this document?"

"I've seen it personally. You may not be aware of this, but in the forbidden zone in the Capital, vast remains of an ancient city were discovered about three years ago. Particularly conspicuous among the theaters and halls was a massive library, which I believe was called Alexandria or something to that effect. The document in question was discovered in its subterranean storerooms. Bugs had

eaten through it in places and it looked to me wholly illegible, but my employer is an expert in such things. He was remarkably successful in deciphering it. In it were detailed lineages of various Noble families scattered across the Frontier."

"And the girl—she's a Noble?"

"From what I was told, she's probably not a pure Noble. He said she may be an abductee, although I'm not particularly well-versed in—"

"So you ain't interested in anything but a payday from this government official?"

"Huh?"

The reason Brewer knit his brow was not only because the hoarse voice was both like D's voice and unlike it at the same time, but even more because it sounded like it was coming from the vicinity of his waist, which was concealed by the table between them.

"Do you have any proof she's an abductee?"

This time the voice was unequivocally D's.

"Only the official back in the Capital would know that for sure. Since I never expected to find myself in the current situation, I don't have any proof with me. Of course, I'd be happy to send one of my young assistants to the Capital to fetch the document, but I doubt whether the owner would allow it out of his possession."

"And what would you know about those other three characters?"

"Oh yes, them. Well, you see," the recruiter began, lowering his voice with great purposefulness, "before I left the Capital, what my employer told me was that abductees with Noble blood sometimes have these mysterious guardian-types looking out for them. Sometimes it might take the shape of a beast; other times, a sudden bit of good luck that protects the descendant of the Nobility. Now, my guess would be that they're probably some variation on this."

"Hmm. That would make sense," the hoarse voice said again, shocking Brewer.

"How long have you been trading in flesh out on the Frontier?" asked D.

"What do you mean by that? I'll have you know I'm a perfectly respectable

mediator in matters of employment and—" The man then shut his mouth and rolled his eyes up to the ceiling as he said, "Thirty years."

"If you've been out here three decades, you should know just how few abductees ever come back alive. Do you have any evidence of that happening to her?"

"Since you asked, there is this."

Taking an electronic recorder out of his jacket pocket, he flipped on the switch. On it was a recording of discussions between Brewer and the sheriff, the doctor, and various influential people around the village. In response to the flesh trader's questions, each of them declared that in her infancy, Raya had disappeared for a whole year.

When the machine finished relating their testimony, Brewer said he wanted to hire D outright to take Raya back from those three characters, adding, "Two weeks ago, those three show up out of the blue. I wouldn't be at all surprised if their boss—a true Noble—was coming, too. I want you to take care of all of them."

II

The next day, Raya's eyes bulged when she saw the highly unlikely pair that paid a call on her farm.

"What about those three characters?" D inquired.

"When I got back from visiting the sheriff, they were gone. I haven't seen hide nor hair of them today," Raya's voice bounced back to him.

But the departure of the mysterious strangers wasn't the only thing that made her dark eyes glow with enthusiasm.

"That's just dandy. Well, will you come along with me then, just like your father agreed to in our contract?" the flesh trader said, still trying to take the girl by the arm.

"I realize that. But please, just wait a little longer," Raya beseeched him. "I

have to give the matter of my father some thought, and I have to say good-bye to a few acquaintances. Give me another week at least."

"I guess that can't be helped. Oh, very well then," Brewer replied, conceding easily.

Needless to say, that wasn't how he really felt. But he'd promised D he'd wait at least a week to see if the Nobility showed up. He didn't really intend to wait that long, and he kept insisting he wanted to head back to the Capital immediately, but the Hunter told him in that case he wouldn't accept the job. Keeping any remarks about how ruthless he was for such a handsome man locked away in his heart, Brewer accepted the Hunter's conditions. As long as he had this young man on his side, he was completely covered where those three weirdoes were concerned. If he just waited out the week, later he'd be able to keep playing up the Nobility angle and hopefully get the Hunter to come along as an escort all the way back to the Capital.

In his heart, he secretly stuck his tongue out at D. The whole story of abductees and the Nobility was a complete fabrication. The voices on his recorder were simply some local folks he'd hired to play along for ten gold coins. His sole concern was that the handsome Vampire Hunter was unlike so many others plying the same trade, but since he really couldn't put his finger on what made D different, there was no point worrying about every little thing.

"Very well, I'll stay in town for another week then," Brewer told the girl. "But the damned hotel bills are liable to break me."

"I know," Raya replied.

Just then, the door to the next room opened roughly and the smell of liquor hit the noses of all. The middle-aged man who appeared with a ruddy face was Raya's father.

"Go on and get the hell out of here already," her father bellowed despite the fact he could barely work his tongue. "If Raya sticks around, there's no telling when more of them freaky bastards will come barging in. That kind of trouble I can do without! Thanks to them, the whole village must think I'm the lowest of the low. When I heard you wanted to take my girl with you, I was genuinely relieved. So why the hell are you still hanging around?"

“Actually, sir—let’s discuss the matter elsewhere.”

After Brewer had disappeared to try and get the father to go along with the story he’d told D, Raya remained staring sadly at the Vampire Hunter.

“What’s wrong?” asked D.

It was rare for this young man to show any interest in others—actually, it was more like an earth-shaking event.

“Nothing. I just thought it would’ve been nicer if you’d come alone—”

“He’s my employer.”

“I realize that. He’s going to take me back to the Capital.” And then, as if cradling a certain expectation, she suddenly asked, “Will you be going with us?”

“I don’t know.”

The color that’d suffused Raya’s countenance for an instant swiftly faded away.

As she got to her feet, she said, “I’m sorry. I haven’t even offered you tea.”

Disappearing into the kitchen, she quickly reappeared with a steaming kettle and a teacup. Pouring the contents of the kettle into the cup, she said, “Here you go.”

Her eyes were turned down as she offered him the drink.

Taking the cup in hand, D said, “Could I trouble you to put some tea leaves in it?”

With a stunned look she peered down at the cup, her face swiftly growing more and more flushed.

“I can’t believe I did that—I’m sorry.”

Opening the lid of the tea canister, she pulled D’s cup closer.

Still looking straight down, she said, “There you are,” and then set the cup before him once again.

D looked down emotionlessly at the cup filled to the very brim with black leaves, then brought it to his lips without saying a word.

“Oh, no! I’ve done it again, haven’t I?”

Her dumbstruck expression twisting, Raya covered her face with both hands and dashed outside through the front door. Her sobs streamed out behind her. Dashing down to the end of the porch, Raya cried out-loud. She didn’t know exactly why. Her tears spilled down into the snow that was piled as high as the floor of the porch, digging a tiny but deep hole.

After about five minutes, she returned to the house.

Still in the same spot as before, D was just taking the cup away from his lips. The tea leaves had been left on the table.

“This is delicious tea,” said D.

“Huh?”

“I’m not just saying that to be polite.”

“Honestly?” Raya asked, her eyes still aimed at the floor.

D nodded. Though he said nothing, Raya knew exactly what he meant.

“I’m glad,” she said, her eyes turning to D naturally. “I’m sorry you had to see me like that.”

“Does it pain you to have to go off to the Capital?”

Though the question actually had no bearing on what Raya had just done, it did serve to lighten her load.

“It’s not a problem,” she said as she took a seat. Her voice was flat, devoid of intonation. “I—Well, it just doesn’t matter. I could stay here and keep living like this, or I can go work in the Capital. Papa sold me, but I don’t mind. He’ll be able to live off that money, and it’ll be easier on me, too. Once I’ve gone to the Capital, there won’t be much point in me worrying about him any more. Tell me—how old do I look?”

Raya looked up at D as she said that. The earnest expression the girl wore seemed to have come completely out of the blue.

“I’m seventeen,” she told him. “Do I look it? Everyone says I look over twenty. And everyone’s always surprised when I tell them my real age. Does that sound

right? Am I that much of an old hag? I can't take it anymore. Having people ask my age, then getting that look on their face. I've had it with hauling water from the well day in and day out, tilling the fields with a hoe, and scorching myself trying to keep the electric fences up against the monsters. I was relieved when Papa sold me to that guy. If I go to the Capital, if I go anywhere but here, I'm sure it can't be as bad as all this."

D listened quietly as she confessed emotions she'd probably never shared with anyone before, but then he said, "It probably hurts your father to do this."

All the strength ebbed from Raya's body. The violent emotions of the moment had passed.

Looking down, the girl said in a flat tone, "I suppose you're right. But he'll forget about me soon enough. After all, that's what happened when my mother died."

"Is that when his drinking got out of hand?"

"Yeah. He's been that way for more than ten years."

"Perhaps he can't get by without drinking. Not everyone can pick themselves up from any disappointment."

"Yeah, but—"

"Are you sure you're the only one who thinks it's best for you to go to the Capital?"

Raya slowly turned to face the door to the next room. Her expression had grown stiff. Then she shook her head ever so slightly.

"No, that'd be a lie," she replied, the words carved deep in the silence.

III

Three days passed. Snow fell relentlessly, reducing all the colors of the world to black and white. Some men who apparently worked for Brewer were at the house from sunrise to sunset, and since they took over the farm work, Raya was

able to start doing needlepoint. As she listened to the sound of the snow piling up, she would suddenly look up and always find D in her field of view. And each and every time, the graceful black shadow was staring out at the snow-covered landscape. Raya couldn't help but wonder if the young man was going to disappear at some point into the harshness of winter.

That night, something happened. One of Brewer's young associates came back covered in blood and told them he'd been attacked by the trio on the northern part of the farm. His wounds were real enough.

After sending D out to investigate, the flesh trader had Raya loaded into a wagon.

"Where am I supposed to go?"

"The Capital, of course."

Brewer's reply left her stunned.

"But—we're leaving without Mister D?"

"You'll be fine without him. Those three freaks won't be back again. You see, D's off chasing his own tail. I'll stay here and explain everything to him. You'd best go on ahead with these boys. See you later!"

"Wait!" she wanted to cry, but there wasn't even time for her to say it before the wagon raced away in a spray of snow.

The world of white sped by as they left the farm and got on the road through the forest. Wind and white snowflakes lashed Raya's face, but suddenly both ceased. The wagon had stopped.

The young man in the driver's seat let out a scream. Back by Raya, the two others turned in his direction and gasped aloud.

The heads of both horses were missing from the shoulder up. As it dawned on the young men that the heads had been removed without the sound of severed bone, a black form skimmed through the group for an instant. Though the headless torsos of the animals remained in the same pose they'd held in life, they toppled over to one side, spraying geysers of black blood.

On the snow to the right side of the wagon, Raya saw a black beast fling the

three human heads it'd just bitten off.

"Now that is an example of my true ability."

And with that remark from the opposite side of the vehicle, Sabey climbed in to join the girl.

"We couldn't get near that miserable flesh trader while he had D around, but fortunately, he was kind enough to do our work for us. Although you may not realize it yet, Miss, he will be coming soon. We must hurry and get you properly prepared."

"What are you talking about? Just who the hell are you, anyway?"

"You'll find out soon enough," Sabey said with apparent relish, baring his white teeth.

Throwing the corpses from the wagon, he settled into the driver's seat. A mass of obsidian muscle whistled into the seat beside him. As the black beast licked its chops, Raya averted her gaze.

Despite the fact that both horses lay on their sides, Sabey took the reins in one hand and made a sweeping gesture with the other. A reddish powder settled over the horses like a mist. As the decapitated bodies staggered back up, Raya thought she must be having a nightmare.

"This isn't part of my power, and it can't do much more than make the horses run, but it should do for now. Off we go," he said with a shake of the reins.

Shrouded in a ghastly air, the hideous horses began to gallop once more.

"What's this?" Sabey said, his eyes bulging.

The stark-white scenery wasn't moving. Actually, the wagon wheels weren't even turning.

The scenery shifted. Vertically. As the wagon was incredibly hoisted into the air, Sabey and the beast alighted without a sound.

"Who the hell are you?!"

"Oh, it's one of you guys," said a voice that rained down on Sabey. The words fell from the head of the titanic figure that'd lifted the wagon and left the

horses' legs kicking vainly in midair.

"So, we meet at last," he chuckled. "I just got into town, but I'm glad I came straight here instead of stopping off for a drink. See, I came out of the forest real quietly while you folks were going at it and hid myself under here. Did I surprise you a little?"

If what the giant—Dynus—said was true, then even the black beast had failed to note his presence.

Perhaps due to his surprise, Sabey stood there stock-still for a moment as if lost in his thoughts. Then his whole face flushed vermilion as he commanded, "Kill him!"

A flash of black lightning raced across the ground, halting in midair.

Moving at super-speed, the vicious beast had removed the heads of three people and a pair of horses in the blink of an eye, yet a gigantic hand had effortlessly closed around its throat to hold it at bay.

"This little pup of yours has a face only a mother could love," Dynus said, but his words were accompanied by a harsh snap.

The beast's body twitched for a few seconds before it moved no more, at which point Dynus tossed it back lightly over his shoulder as if he were discarding a little piece of trash. Limning a smooth parabola, the corpse sailed over a stand of trees that was eighty to a hundred feet high and disappeared in a testament to the unbelievable brute strength of the giant.

"Okay, now we're getting down to the main event. Just relax and make your move. I think I'll stick with this."

And with these words, the giant took the hand he'd used to slay the beast and put it back against the bottom of the wagon.

Sabey's expression was one of indignation for a heartbeat, and then his lips curled into a satisfied grin. At the same time, a deathly stillness radiated out around him.

"Welcome to the land of the beasts!" he said.

It was a second later that a pair of gargantuan forms pounced on Dynus from

behind.

“Whoa there!” the giant said, barely managing to keep himself from tumbling forward as grizzly bears more than six feet tall mauled him mercilessly with fangs and claws.

Blue sparks flew from his chest and the base of his neck.

“What a joke,” the giant muttered shamelessly, adding a shout of, “Here you go!”

And with that, Dynus hurled the wagon at Sabey, horses and all. The impact caused snow to fall from the stand of trees, while Raya was thrown free of the wagon and struck her head hard against the ground, rendering her unconscious.

“Just watch this,” Dynus said to Sabey as he leapt away, then he wrapped one arm around the trunk of each of the massive bears.

Each weighed a good ton. But by the look of things, that was light for him. He quickly squeezed their torsos down into an hourglass shape, and then there was a hearty string of snaps as their bones shattered. The beasts were spitting up blood as the giant slammed their heads together to finish them off before he made an easy leap into the air.

Sabey didn’t even have time to run. Just as the giant landed, he struck the man in the head with a fist the size of a boulder, killing him instantly. Bright blood spattered across the snow and Dynus’s face.

“Well, that takes care of one of them. I guess that just leaves the one I’m here for. Ah, that should be a piece of cake.”

Dynus then turned around to face the way the wagon had come and added, “A handsome man against a snowy landscape? Talk about a freakin’ work of art!”

As he stood there book-ended by pure white forest, the young man in a coat blacker than the darkness looked like nothing less than a sculpture hewn in heaven itself.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLE

CHAPTER 3

I

You've been there a while, haven't you?" Dynus said to D, but the Hunter advanced without speaking.

He didn't race forward in a hurry. As the giant suggested, he'd been following the wagon from the very start. He'd seen Brewer's scheme coming a mile off.

"Hey, there! Wait just a second," the giant said as he stuck both hands out—although technically, he was sticking them down. "I have no intention of throwing down with you. Don't wanna use up all my strength before the main event. I'll give you back the woman safe and sound."

"From the way you say it, the girl was what you were after."

"Spare me. I don't wanna kill someone who doesn't even know who they are."

"She doesn't know who she is?"

"That's right. Because I don't have that tingle running down my spine. If I were to fight her now, I'd just be tearing apart an innocent girl. Could you bring yourself to do something like that?"

"No."

"Wow," Dynus replied, boldly baring his gleaming white teeth in a smile. "Knock it off. If you smile at me like that, you're gonna make me all bashful. You lady-killer! Well, hurry up and take her back home so you can get her patched up. Huh?"

As he turned to where Raya had been thrown, his eyes went wide. An elliptical depression had been left in the snow, but the girl's body had vanished without warning. And without D even noticing.

"I didn't do it," Dynus declared with a frantic wave of his hands. "And I'd say you didn't, either. You suppose it was one of that guy's cronies? Nah, I'd have noticed if it was one of them. Then it'd have to be—"

“Do you have some idea where she could’ve gone?”

“Let me see,” the giant said, bringing his hand to his chin as he deliberated. “I’d say she’s at her castle.”

Turning toward the forest, D gave a whistle. Climbing onto the cyborg horse that came galloping out, he said, “I’ll show you the way.”

“How am I supposed to get there?”

“You’ve got a wagon.”

“You’re not exactly mister personality, are you? But I see your point. The girl’s in such rough shape, she could freeze to death out here. I guess I’m still half asleep. Just give me a second.”

Dynus wasted no time in returning from the woods carrying the usual log with the cloth bundle tied to one end, quickly righted the wagon, and lashed the headless horses that even now kicked at the earth in hopes of fulfilling their role.

As they rode along side by side, D said to the giant, “I’d like to hear about this situation.”

“Yeah, sure—though to tell the truth, I don’t know much about it either. At any rate, that woman and I are apparently hereditary foes. We’ve probably been set up as proxies in a war between Nobles. Only, I knew where she was right away, but she doesn’t seem to have awakened yet. That’s why the flunkies got here first.”

“Why don’t you just stop the fight?”

“I can’t do that. Or, to put it another way, I was made so I can’t even think that way. And once she comes around, she won’t be able to either.”

“And if she never comes around?” asked the Hunter.

“That’s a thought. If possible, that’s the way I hope it’ll go. I’m made not to fight anyone I don’t view as a foe. So that’d probably be best for the girl, too.”

“You’re a strange warrior.”

“There’s more to being a warrior than just fighting. There’s a little thing called fair play,” Dynus said, his voice rising in a laugh.

Startled snow plopped down from the trees by the road.

“Sure is pretty,” the colossal warrior said as he squinted his eyes. “The world’s such a beautiful place, but it’s just somewhere for me to fight. Something’s just not right about that. Why’d those bastards in the Nobility ever get it into their heads to make something like me? It’s tragic to be good for nothing but killing. I want to be of more use to the world, you know?”

The pair came out onto a plain. At some point the snow had stopped falling, and now the moon was out with a silvery glow. By its light, the snowfields glittered like a mirror that seemed to stretch on forever.

Suddenly the scenery changed. Blue light colored the pair as a desolate, snowless plain bare of even a blade of grass exposed itself.

“This way.”

Dynus drove the wagon through a region studded with one fantastic rock formation after another—they must’ve continued on for the better part of a mile. From off in the distance, rows of spacious buildings that certainly seemed to be ruins crept into view. The castle walls, the domed ceilings, the stone columns, the great foundation—and a huge reactor and electronic barrier larger than most villages made it seem as if there was still life in these ruins that were the size of a great city.

Not hesitating in the least, Dynus slipped into one particularly towering structure and found Raya lying in a room where only the central foundation remained. D had already dismounted and taken the girl’s pulse.

“How is she?” the giant asked.

“Fine,” was all that D said, but it put the giant at ease.

Oddly enough, the two of them seemed to be able to communicate without words. Neither mentioned how miraculous it was that even on foot, she’d managed to get there ahead of them.

Before D could lift her in his arms, the girl opened her eyes the tiniest bit.

“I—What happened to me?”

“You should get some rest.”

Looking all around with fearful eyes, she said, “These are the ruins of Castle Sinestro, aren’t they? What am I doing here?”

“So you don’t remember anything?” Dynus inquired.

In reply, Raya shrieked and clung tightly to D. But the reason she wasn’t really terribly afraid was because she hadn’t seen Dynus running amok. The wagon had been between them, with one in it and the other under it.

“Who’s he?” she asked.

Silence descended.

But just as Raya was about to get suspicious, the giant said, “Heck, I’m your new employee. I heard you needed help out at your place, so here I am!”

Raya looked up at D.

“So it would seem,” the Vampire Hunter told her.

The next day, work began at Raya’s house with a change of cast. Dynus was truly adaptable in his activities. And the amount of energy pent up in his body was far different from what a human could store. He set the tilting roof of the main house straight again, then filled the nearly empty woodshed and water tank with a store that would last a good three years.

“You take it easy and leave all the heavy work to me,” the giant told Raya as he peered down at her and grinned. It was the sort of smile one couldn’t help but return, and though the girl’s features were stiff at first, they quickly softened.

“That man—is he really a farmhand?”

“Yes,” was all D said in reply.

“But why would he come to my house? We can’t even afford to pay him.”

“Apparently all he wants is enough to eat in the coming year.”

“But that’s not very—”

“Let him do as he likes. These days, there are a lot of odd characters running around.”

“That’ll be great for our farm, but what should I do? It’s not like Mr. Brewer will let me stay here indefinitely.”

“Don’t worry about him,” D said softly. “We’ve come to an agreement.”

That evening, the three of them returned to her home and Dynus set the severed heads of the men who’d tried to make off with Raya out in front of the speechless flesh trader.

As Brewer tipped over in his chair, D said to him, “You tried to pull a fast one, didn’t you? Leave Raya on the farm until he’s finished his business.”

Like a man possessed, the flesh trader had accepted D’s declaration.

A week passed peacefully, and after finishing repairs on the farm, Dynus turned his energy toward expanding the fields. The western edge of their land was a wild stretch of heavy undergrowth. With a tiny hoe in his hands, the giant worked from early morning at reclaiming the ground, and by late that night he’d succeeded in turning it into rich farmland. Even the girl’s alcoholic father couldn’t help but watch him work.

“Let me show you something interesting,” the giant said after hearing Raya complain about how difficult it was to use the snowy roads.

Gathering the whole group on the porch, he then went out to stand about thirty feet away in the center of the front yard. There was about a foot and a half of snow on the ground.

A summer breeze stroked Raya’s cheek. It was as if the very sun had landed in the yard as steam rose from the ground and the icicles fell from the eaves. If D hadn’t intercepted the icy spears, Raya and Brewer—who was still around—probably would’ve been impaled by them. When Dynus presently appeared from the steaming mist in fine spirits, the whole yard was cleared of snow, leaving the black earth exposed. From this, it became clear that Dynus could control his body temperature and radiate heat at will.

D took that opportunity to escort Brewer back to town and sent off an express letter to the Capital. Naturally, it was to request data on any situations resembling Raya’s from the library. He’d known from the very start that the other story about Raya’s connection to the Nobility had been a fabrication . .

.and he'd said as much when the severed heads were laid out.

"How did you know?" the flesh trader had asked, one eye bugging behind his monocle.

Of course, D hadn't replied.

"So you knew from the get-go? Then why'd you come out here to the girl's place? Vampire Hunter 'D' shouldn't care at all unless the Nobility have shown their fangs. Yet you came out here anyway. Oh, I get it—you're sweet on the girl, are you?"

"Was there really a library?" D had asked him.

"Yes, that part was true."

"Afterward, it'll be too late to tell me it was another lie."

Though ice water coursed down his spine, Brewer replied, "It's true. By the way, you sure I'm not in the way here?"

"We don't have any real need for a flesh trader."

"From time to time, you really sound like an old man," Brewer commented. "I've already parted with the princely sum of six thousand dalas, you know. When the time comes, I have every right to take that girl to the Capital. But seeing the awkward incident we had earlier, I'm not saying she has to go right away."

Of course, Brewer couldn't very well stay at Raya's house, but he showed up every day, grinning out in the garden or sitting inside enjoying the tea and cakes he brought just for that purpose. Oddly enough, neither Raya's father nor the girl herself seemed to harbor any ill will toward this buyer and seller of humanity.

"You're a strange fella, aren't you?" Dynus said to him somewhat suspiciously.

"That's my natural charm," the flesh trader replied.

The northern sky clouded heavily, as if spring's eventual arrival were no more than a legend, and the snow continued to fall, stark and white, to freeze the hearts of humanity.

One day, as the white snow piled up on the colossal figure digging a new well,

Raya walked up and held her umbrella over him.

“Did you actually come here to help out at my house?” she asked.

“I sure did,” the giant replied without hesitation.

“I find that hard to believe,” Raya said, training her probing gaze on the giant. “There must be tons of better jobs for you in the village. Any place would be glad to have someone like you through the winter. So, what are you doing out here at our spread?”

“Well, it was love at first sight!”

“What?!”

“No, I don’t mean with you. I mean with the young fella.”

“Mister D?” Raya said, putting her hand up to her mouth and making a gagging sound.

“Hey, what’s that all about? Whoever said there was something wrong with one man being smitten with another? I mean, look how gorgeous he is! The most beautiful woman in the Capital probably couldn’t hold a candle to him.”

Raya got a new glint of light in her eye.

“Have you been to the Capital?”

“Nope. Can’t say that I have,” the giant replied.

“But you just said—”

“I said ‘probably,’ didn’t I?”

“I wonder what kind of place it is,” Raya mused as she swung the umbrella to dislodge the snow that’d collected on it.

“It was the headquarters of the Nobility. That’s no place for humans to be living.”

“Is it really that awful?”

“Yeah. You know, the Nobles weren’t good for squat. They completely ignored what anyone else thought or felt and made all kinds of monsters. I wonder how those bastards would’ve liked being one of those freaks.” Then scratching his

head bashfully, the giant added with a wry smile, “You get what I mean?”

“You . . . you were made by the Nobility . . .” Raya said, her voice carrying an unavoidable tremble. “So . . . why are you here?”

“The Nobility might’ve made me, but I’ve still gotta eat to survive.”

Dynus brought the hoe down. His timing must’ve been perfect, because he scooped a three-foot-square section clean out of the ground. He’d already gone down ten feet—the top of his head was at the same level as the ground. The hole was more than fifteen feet in diameter, and was more like a pond than a well.

Raya simply left everything to the silence of the falling snow. Though she wished the gorgeous young man were there, the figure in black had gone off to check the farm’s perimeter. This was a problem she’d have to solve on her own. The hand she used to clutch the umbrella trembled a bit.

Raya bravely began, “That day . . . I had the strangest dream . . . On the day I met you, that is . . . I went underground somewhere and got hooked to these mysterious machines . . . and then I understood everything. That I . . . I’m not the real me. The other me is a scary, scary woman . . . one who lives to do battle with someone.”

Taking another bite out of the ground with his hoe, Dynus asked, “You said ‘someone’—like who?”

“You want to know?”

“Yeah.”

Perhaps the giant sensed that at some point the volume of snow falling on him had changed. Raya’s umbrella was still open, but she held it with the tip aimed downward. The end of it was honed to a sharp point for use against monstrous beasts. The back of the giant’s head lay right before her.

Suddenly throwing down her umbrella, Raya ran back toward the house. A number of shadows drifted across her innocent countenance.

Flying in through the front door, she found her father in the living room. It wasn’t until she hugged up against his burly chest that she noticed he didn’t

have a certain odor about him.

“Hey, now! What’s the matter?”

“I’m scared, Papa! Really scared. I’m your daughter, aren’t I? I was born here, right? And I had a mother and everything, didn’t I?”

“Sure you did. What are you getting at anyhow?”

“It doesn’t matter. Not so long as I know that. Just keep holding onto me.”

Not knowing exactly what was going on, the father gently supported his daughter’s form. He got the feeling that things were just like they’d been a long time ago.

A little while later, D and Dynus came in together.

“Is she okay?” Dynus asked worriedly.

“There doesn’t seem to be any reason for concern,” D said as his gaze fell on Raya breathing easily as she slumbered on the sofa. Beside her sat her father, protecting the defenseless silhouette with his own hard gaze.

“What’s this?” Dynus said as he took a sniff. “You given up the booze?”

“Yep,” the father replied. “After seeing how you were busting your hump out there, I realized how pathetic I’d become. So I decided to give it another go. And the first part of that was to swear off drinking and smoking.”

“That’s a nice resolution. I was hoping I’d be able to take it a little easier. Give it your best tomorrow.”

“No, I’m getting started today. I’m gonna show you how to dig a well!”

Clutching his belly and laughing for a while, Dynus then said, “Oh, you’re too much! By all means, show me how, sir.”

“You better believe I will. Okay, ready to go?”

Turning toward the door, the father said to D, “Sorry, but could I have you stay with her? I’m sure she’ll be a lot safer with you than with me.”

Saying nothing, D stepped over by the entryway.

One day, when the sun put in a rare appearance, D was notified that the book he'd ordered had arrived. Visiting the post office to claim it, he met someone there.

"Serna Nichol is my name. I'm the author of the book you requested," the young linguist said with a smile, a volume containing his latest research in one hand.

But when the two of them arrived at the farm, Dynus and Raya were nowhere to be found, having vanished completely.

II

The father had gone into town with D and was still there trying to find a cultivator.

D went out back and got on his horse.

Mounting a borrowed horse, Serna said, "It may be they're already going at it —where should we go?"

"I have a good idea. Wait here," the Hunter told him.

"It may not look it, but I can handle a steed."

D galloped off without even replying.

Before he'd pursued the Hunter for even a hundred yards, the linguist gave up. Though D's cyborg horse was the kind you'd find by the dozen in any town, it raced off at twice the speed of his own mount.

"I'll be damned. Things like this are why the Frontier scares me."

Dejectedly returning to the farm, Serna decided to stay put.

At a point a little more than a mile from the ruins, D saw a gigantic figure approaching from up ahead. Dynus had both arms out in front of his chest, and in them he carried Raya and his great log of a club. He was clad in armor, and his appearance and that of the girl were a stark testament to what had transpired.

Each of them had fresh blood dribbling from their forehead down to their chin.

"She ain't dead," Dynus volunteered. "She picked the perfect time to switch back to normal. And the shock of it made her faint dead away. Yeah, it looks like she hasn't fully gone over yet."

"I'll take her on the horse with me," D said as he extended his arms.

The giant shook his head, saying, "I'll bring her back. She's my nemesis, after all. That's just courtesy. I already put some of my special salve on her wounds."

"How about those other two characters?"

"Those clowns didn't show themselves. But they're definitely hanging around close by."

That much D already knew—he'd been able to sense their presence in the vicinity of the farm constantly. Perhaps the reason they hadn't attacked was because Raya hadn't awakened to her potential, or because they actually feared Dynus's power. And maybe they hadn't come out to aid Raya when she lost consciousness because they knew that Dynus was only interested in doing battle with her in her warrior state.

The giant walked back over several miles of road.

"It's a pity, I tell you. Why the hell does a good girl like her have to fight me?"

"When did she change?" asked the Hunter.

"While I was splitting wood."

Dynus was out at the woodshed and Raya by the chicken coop a few hundred yards away, but she flew right to him.

We meet at last, Raya had said.

"I was so happy. I'd finally met the very opponent I was always meant to fight, D. And I could tell Raya was delighted, too. Hell, she even said so."

I'm so glad, Raya had told him. This is the real me. Consider that gentle little farm girl no more than a dream. I've been waiting for you for so long. Come!

And then the two of them had gone out to the ruins to square off.

D didn't ask the particulars of their brutal battle, and Dynus didn't offer them.

It was soon after she'd been placed in her bed back at the farm that Raya regained consciousness. The frightened look in her eyes belonged to the ordinary girl they all knew. Her gaze clinging desperately to D, she said with bloodless lips, "What's happened to me?"

But it was Dynus that responded, saying, "Nothing at all."

"Really? You mean to tell me I was dreaming or something? I think in my dreams I was fighting someone. I'm scared. I can still remember how I felt at the time. I—I was so thrilled by the battle, by the thought of slaying my foe."

D's left hand came to rest on her trembling brow.

"You should sleep."

Nodding, the girl took a deep breath—and she quickly fell into the steady breathing of slumber.

"Wow, that was fast," Dynus said with admiration.

D told him, "Let's head outside."

From her bedroom, the two went straight out to the porch.

"How's her father doing?"

"He hasn't come back from town yet." Tossing his chin in the direction of the house, D added, "I'm going back in to have a talk with a certain scholar. Care to join me?"

"Is it about the two of us?" asked the giant.

"Yes."

"Don't bother then. At this point, finding out why we have to fight won't accomplish squat . . . although I do still worry about her."

"Here comes another man who wants to concern himself with her," said the Hunter.

"What?!"

On seeing the motorized carriage coming in through the entrance to the farm flanked by riders, Dynus smiled wryly.

“Well, that’s a kick in the pants,” he remarked.

The carriage bore the mark of the “Frontier Garrison.” Troopers piled out of the vehicle like ants onto the white snow.

“That’s them! They’re the culprits who’ve interfered with my business,” screeched none other than Brewer.

A middle-aged man—the apparent leader—stepped forward from the pack of troopers. Though all the men carried gas-powered rifles, they still had the muzzles pointed at the ground.

“Pleased to meet you. Kevin’s the name. I’m captain of the Northern Eighth Division, Frontier Garrison. Fact of the matter is, two days back, we got a complaint from Mr. Brewer here. According to him, the two of you are infringing on his rights. Now, I don’t mean to—”

“So I take it the flesh trader told you we’re standing in the way of him buying a girl?”

“I resent that!” Brewer bellowed as his eyes bulged in their sockets. Holding up a sheet of paper with his right hand, he said, “Captain, this is the very same contract I showed you earlier. I have the right to bring that girl back to the Capital. Kindly drive these two off immediately!”

“—And that’s about the size of it,” the captain continued. “At any rate, the contract’s real enough. Would you be good enough to hand over the girl?”

“I’m afraid we can’t do that,” the giant replied. “See, I’ve got business of my own with her.”

The captain’s expression clouded as he said, “Then I guess you leave us no choice. We’ll have to use force. You’d best bring the young lady on out here.”

“Sure thing. Why don’t you go get her?”

Respectfully stepping to one side, Dynus gestured to the front door.

D went back into the house without saying a word.

“What, you’re not gonna watch?” his left hand said with obvious dissatisfaction.

“I don’t want any part of that nonsense.”

“Shit, it’d be such a good show, too! You’re no fun at all, you know that?”

Angry shouts and the sounds of a slugfest echoed from the yard. But they didn’t continue for long.

D went into the living room.

Serna was standing over by the window.

“He’s really going at it!” the linguist said, his hand balled into a fist. He was quite excited—he was still so young. “It’s incredible! He just knocked five of them down at once. The whole squad is out of commission now. Oh, he just caught hold of that other guy!”

Letting a carefree smile rise to his lips, Serna took a seat in front of D.

“You may think it rude, but while everyone was out I took the liberty of investigating the house. And I just finished examining the girl in the bedroom, too.”

“And what did you find?” asked D.

“There’s no evidence that she is what we think. However—”

“Apparently she underwent some sort of transfiguration.”

“In that case, there can be no mistake,” Serna remarked, rubbing his temple.

“How about the man?”

“His size certainly fits.”

Serna recalled the tragedy that’d occurred three years earlier while investigating a certain mountain stronghold where a vast subterranean chamber had held rows of artificial human warriors. A section of the massive rock walls looming over them had suddenly collapsed, crushing ten scientists who were busy working down below. At the time, Serna was having a smoke with a colleague out on a deck that overlooked the mountain. Though the hole that’d been dug through the rock wall and the booming laugh that was left behind had done little to reveal the identity of whatever had been down there, at least it solved the mystery of where all of the power had been going. If the giant outside

were to be set into that opening, it'd be a perfect fit.

"So it's just as we thought," D said, adding, "We're looking for some way to keep the girl just as she is now."

"What a waste. At least, that's what I'd normally say if I weren't afraid of getting my head bitten off."

"Do you know of a way?"

"Sure," Serna replied easily.

On the way back to the farm from the post office, they'd exchanged information on the connection between the giant and the girl. That was why D could speak so directly to him now.

"Six months back, several ancient manuscripts were discovered in the remains of a moving continent. They contained a record of another case like this."

"Unlike Dynus, she's just a regular girl. She was born right here in the village to ordinary parents. There's a mountain of evidence in support of this," said the Hunter.

"That may be, but in her case I believe it's actually a matter of something that happened before her birth. One of her forebears, or possibly even both sides of the family, may have undergone some sort of genetic manipulation. The will and strength, the knowledge and superhuman powers of a warrior—all of these slumbered in their blood for uncounted generations until Dynus's awakening called them to the fore. I'm quite certain that's the case here."

"Why was it that she went out to the ruins?"

"I believe that even for someone with the power of the Nobility, it would be a monumental task to attempt to free the warrior consciousness that's been in her family's blood for thousands of years. There must be some sort of equipment wreckage somewhere around here that's intended to aid in that process."

"Would it be possible to keep her as she is now?"

"If the equipment remains. You said there were some ruins nearby?"

"Care to go there?" asked D.

“I can handle a horse—” Serna began to say, but he shrugged his shoulders and gave up. He’d just recalled his humiliating performance earlier.

At that point, the door loudly swung open.

“Save me!” the blood-soaked Brewer cried as he raced in. Although he was trying desperately to take refuge behind D, at some point the young man in black had turned so that he was facing him.

A shadow fell across the doorway.

“Come on out, you dirty bastard!”

“Me?” Brewer squeaked, throwing himself flat on the floor.

Even Serna backed away.

“I took care of the others outside. Don’t worry—I only knocked them out. Just left one awake so he could drive ’em back in the carriage.”

“We might be able to do something for Raya.”

At D’s word’s, the giant’s eyes went wide.

“Great! Is he the one that’s gonna do it?”

With an apprehensive squeak, the linguist backed against the wall.

“Thank you kindly. I’ll be in your debt. You’re a saint . . . an angel!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Serna replied modestly.

A face three times as large as the linguist’s and only a foot away said, “That little girl hasn’t had it none too easy up till now. I’ll thank you to see to it that this is an exception.”

“Are you sure you won’t have a problem with this? You’ll lose your opponent.”

“Ah, what’s that to me? I’ll get over it. Hey, you bastard,” he added as he thrust out a hand and did a remarkable job of snagging Brewer before he could escape. “What do you figure I should do with this here flesh trader, D? Having his head part company with his body would be a gift to humanity.”

“I suppose we should be happy he brought the garrison instead of a bunch of hired thugs,” D remarked.

“That’s right!” the man with the monocle cried as he hung ten feet in the air with arms and legs flailing. “I’ve remained within the bounds of the law. Unhand me, would you? Let me go!”

“Well, I suppose I can forgive you. But I’m warning you: don’t even think about ever showing your face around here again. Hey, D—I’ll leave the rest of it to you. I’m not so good with all that complicated stuff.”

Once the giant had left to the accompaniment of shrieks and jeers, D said to the still-rooted linguist, “Shall we go?”

Needless to say, he had to be talking about going out to the equipment that could save Raya.

“Of course.”

As he was putting his arms through the sleeves of his insulated coat, Serna stiffened. A chill had raced down the length of his body. He’d seen D’s face— he thought the Hunter looked somber. Now he was afraid to look in the same direction.

The door between them and the back room opened, and Raya was standing there. She was in her pajamas. And though she clutched a long broom, she hadn’t come out to do any cleaning.

“Have you awakened again?” D inquired softly.

“I suppose I should thank you again for all you’ve done,” Raya said with a grin.

Though neither her face nor her voice had changed, the girl who stood there giving off a ghastly aura was no one D recognized.

“I have a favor to ask of you. Don’t interfere. This is our job, you know. Just lend your power to the person I am while I sleep.”

Gently lowering her gaze, Raya headed toward the doorway.

As she looked down from the porch, the giant stood on the snow-covered earth below with his club in one hand and stared back at her. Not far from him, a man’s legs jutted from a snow bank, kicking furiously.

“Well, well,” said Dynus.

Raya simply nodded. A second later, she pounced. As she swung her broom down in midair, her figure was swallowed by the sun to her back.

Warrior instinct alone allowed Dynus to get the log up over his head in time.

The whoosh of the broom coming down split the winter air, and with a tremendous roar, the log bowed under the impact.

“Whoa!” Dynus cried as he leapt back, his voice ringing with pain. His arms were both numb.

As he watched Raya close on him, her speed was incredible. Time and again she brought the broom down on him while he barely managed to parry each blow. It was a sight to see as she drove him down on one knee. Such was the force of her blows. The power of Raya—the warrior woman of Sinestro!

There was the sound of wood striking wood, and then the log club was finally knocked from the giant’s hands.

As Raya raised her broom for a triumphant blow, a colossal arm tightened around her waist and pulled her close. From where D stood on the porch, the two of them looked as if they were fusing together in a white-hot glow, and the hot wind that snarled by him carried moisture.

“Stay inside,” D said, reaching back to shut the door behind him as he stared at the core of the raging heat.

The vapor that arose churned at an intense rate. Doubtless the deadly battle unfolding within that cloud was beyond the imagining of even D himself. The white mist burst through the fence and rammed into the forest.

D raced down off the porch. Behind him, he could hear Serna shouting. His field of view was crimson. In the wake of the steam cloud, flames had arisen.

D got on his horse and galloped into the forest. Charging by one side of the vapor cloud, he said, “Go to Castle Sinestro!”

The steam buffeted his cheeks, and the cloud split in two. One half became a stark naked girl who took off into the forest, the other an armored warrior who bounded onto the road. Each of them glanced at D—Raya with a sad look, and Dynus with a thin smile. But these images soon disappeared, borne away by the

winter wind.

Tugging on his horse's reins, D returned to the road. To his rear there was the sound of hoofbeats.

"This is amazing! I managed to rescue Brewer, but if someone doesn't hurry up and put that fire out, this whole area will be a sea of flames."

Turning to Serna, D said, “I need you to get word to the village.”

“Okay. But what’ll you do?”

“Meet up with me later at Castle Sinestro. It’s straight down this road.”

“Got you.”

D wheeled his horse around. His coat fluttered out against the wintry sky like something out of a painting. He wasn’t headed down the road—his mount was galloping off into the forest.

Perhaps there was some secret trick to the way he worked the reins, because the completely commonplace cyborg horse he rode performed like a peerless thoroughbred. Though roots and branches jutted out with utter disregard for the plans of passers-by, not once did they ever come into contact with D. His horse’s hooves merely pounded the ground, and the mount never showed a moment’s hesitation.

On glimpsing a plain of white between the trees, D tugged the reins to the right. The snow that fell from a massive branch sent up a spray of white to one side of him. A rough wooden needle seared through the air toward the branch in question.

“Oh, you’re good!” a voice intoned from every possible direction. “It’s Crumb. Remember me? I figured you’d take the shortest possible route to these coordinates, so I set a trap. This time things won’t go as well for you as they did back at the warehouse.”

D’s body rose straight out of the saddle, like a dark blossom opening in a silvery white world. Beneath his feet, his mount met a powdery spray of snow as it was cruelly driven to its knees. But did D see the naked steel that sank halfway into his horse’s neck?

The instant he landed on the massive branch, D made a horizontal swipe with his sword. The blade thrust from the snow that’d collected on the branch changed direction of its own accord, leaving the right arm that grasped it exposed all the way to the shoulder as it became motionless on the tree limb. Although the Hunter had only struck with his weapon once, the awesome power was manifested in the wounds he’d dealt the arm, splitting the flesh wide open

from the wrist to the shoulder.

"Fighting a disembodied arm is kind of creepy," D's left hand said in a sarcastic tone. "It'd seem the first guy you fought has the ability to do more than just split in two. Watch yourself."

The hoarse voice flowed downward.

At the same moment D landed on the ground, three streaks of light pierced him . . .or so it appeared. A left arm and two legs—each wielding a sword—fell to the ground, split lengthwise.

Not even bothering to turn, D made an underhanded throw to his rear with his left hand. With only his head and trunk remaining, it seemed Crumb still planned on attacking D.

Having taken a rough wooden needle in a spot about three feet off the ground, the torso was left nailed to the very same tree trunk it'd just leapt out from behind. The needle ran right through its neck.

Not even bothering to look at it, D walked off toward the exit from the forest, and then unexpectedly spun his right hand around like a veritable top. The blob that flew into the iridescent blur cracked in two before falling to the ground. Lacking a head and all four limbs, the trunk now looked somewhat forlorn.

"Not bad at all. But this was actually my true form."

A miniature version of Crumb's face poked out from where the old head had been. It had arms and legs attached to it, too. Its tiny hand clutched a knife.

A vermilion line suddenly ran from the tip of his head all the way down to his crotch, and this time Crumb really did split in half and fall dead in the snow.

"Seems they've been watching you all along. Were you wise to them?" the Hunter's left hand asked, but its question was swallowed by the white winds that surrounded D as he dashed on. Lost in the snow.

ONTO THE WHITE BATTLEFIELD

CHAPTER 4

Occasionally the silently falling emblems of winter would be caught in an eddying wind and blown around like bubbles. The imposing castle and all its pillars were caked with white, their outlines left terribly indistinct. And beyond them lay the silvery world where the line between heaven and earth was no longer distinguishable.

The pair of figures that'd appeared without warning was quickly swallowed by the flowing whiteness, yet their colors faintly remained like a watercolor painting.

"Aren't you cold?" asked the giant.

Raya was stark naked.

"Well, it's all your fault, you know," she countered.

"I suppose it is, at that."

"This is my domain. I'll thank you not to imagine you're at an advantage."

"I know," the giant said as he took a quick peek over his shoulder.

"You're thinking about him, aren't you?" said the woman.

"You mean to tell me you're not?"

"I'd like to see him once more."

"He might not be very personable, but he's a good guy," Dynus remarked.

"He's a sad man, though."

"You can say that again—heh, I don't think he'd care to have us empathizing with him. Compared to him, our fate's not that bad. At least this can be concluded."

"How true. Come to me."

"But why do we fight? We don't know each other from a hole in the ground."

“It’s a pointless question. You should know that,” Raya said, her voice tossed by the wind.

“You’ve got a point,” the giant said with a nod, and then he swung his club with one hand. “We still fight, even though both our masters are now gone. That’s a laugh.”

“I hate you.”

“We don’t hate each other. We’re just hostile. And even that emotion doesn’t really belong to us.”

“It seems you’ve gone soft on me. You’ll never be able to beat me like that.”

“And what happens when one of us wins?”

The wind whistled. There were no words for it to shred. There were only warriors.

Raya’s body sank a bit. She was empty-handed. Her broom had been lost.

Suddenly, the ground beneath the giant’s feet glowed as electric shocks ran in reverse. The few streaks of light that challenged the heavens formed a massive cylinder, giving the desolate white world a purplish hue. And in the center of that cylinder was the giant.

Even after the light suddenly disappeared, the ruins stood out sharply from the white of the snow for some time to come.

“Not too shabby,” the giant said as he clapped at all the smoking sections of his body with both hands. “This certainly is your domain, all right. But I still have a few tricks of my own.”

He brought his right hand up to his mouth, and his thick lips disgorged a shining ball. As he grabbed it and hurled it into the air, the winter was greeted by a miniature sun. Apparently the feverish globe was emitting a tremendous heat of its own, and wrapped around it was a fiery corona exactly like that of the real sun. It instantly reached a temperature of a hundred million degrees. Even the constituent atoms of the very ground were scorched, reduced to nothingness.

And out of that inferno, a naked figure flew at the giant’s chest.

He was sent flying thirty feet, his arm still raised in a hasty block. As he rolled

on the ground, snow caked around his body like a belt. And the belt was tinged with red.

Quickly rising again, the giant clutched the right side of his chest and spat up bright blood. “You’re one hell of a woman, you know. If I didn’t have this armor, I’d have been a goner.”

“And if this barrier wasn’t still active, I’d have been reduced to ashes,” Raya replied coldly.

“Interesting. We’re finally getting down to business.”

The giant held his log club at the ready. When Raya’s body gently tilted forward, the weapon sailed through the air, forcing her lithe form to jump back.

“What the hell?!” Dynus groaned, knitting his brow.

He’d noticed the change that’d come over Raya.

“Not again!” he shouted as he raced toward her. As he came alongside her, his legs grew wobbly.

“That kick of yours sure knocked me for a loop,” he said.

Even as Dynus fell on top of the girl, he used both arms to support his weight and avoid a direct hit before rolling off to one side.

Several seconds later, a shadowy figure appeared beside the two prone forms.

“You’re both unbelievably strong,” spat the man who’d once identified himself as Duran, his face as emotionless as a Noh mask. “This big bastard and D are so intense, we couldn’t very easily make a move, but it looks like our time has finally come. Now I’ll put an end to this battle that’s been going on for ten thousand years. Oh, but it’s been so long . . .”

As exhaustion seemed to spread through his whole body, the man in farm attire knelt down by the giant's side. Thrusting both hands out before him, he began to move them as if he were tracing something in the air. And then, after mere seconds, an indistinct blue shape formed in the space that had clearly been vacant before. As he moved his hands with complete focus, Duran wore the expression of a flagellant. In no time at all, the semitransparent form he was manipulating became that of the giant lying beside him—Dynus.

Duran stood up. As he did so, his hands also rose—and the other Dynus rose with them. And then the huge effigy through which the falling snow could still be glimpsed was positioned right on top of the real giant. Duran tumbled back on his ass, thoroughly winded. His face was pale.

Taking a half dozen deep breaths, he then moved on to the next bizarre act. He placed his hands to either side of his head.

Snow danced around.

Overlapping like a double exposure, the twin forms of Dynus began to mysteriously lose their color from the top of their heads—not only the duplicate, but the body beneath it as well. Impressive as Dynus was, it didn't seem likely that the warrior would be able to continue the fight once his head had been erased. But given Duran's sorcerous might, it was likely he'd wipe the man's whole body out of existence.

However, before the fearful sorcerer could claim the victory that lay right before him, he had to turn.

Though the figure was blurred by the white, the crazily gusting snow did nothing to detract from his beauty.

"D—so you decided to come after all?" Duran muttered in a faraway tone as he stood up. "That being the case, Crumb must've been slain. I shall have to avenge him."

"I have no intention of getting involved in your battle," D said softly.

"Too late. Having killed one of my colleagues, you're now part of this," Duran informed him in a weary-sounding voice. He was aware that when D's presence had interrupted his concentration, Dynus's head had returned to normal. Both

of his hands rose.

D didn't tell him to stop.

He made a few delicate gestures, and a beautiful blue illusion flew at D from his fingertips. The instant the black figure who'd split that image in two landed right in front of Duran, the sorcerer's body was slashed in half by a diagonal stroke.

Tearing through the bloody mist, D raced over to the two combatants. When he put his left hand to Raya's brow, she opened her eyes a crack. They were the eyes of an ordinary farm girl.

"What's going on, D? Why on earth am I . . ."

"You were in an accident," said D. "Dynus protected you."

"Really? I'm glad. I had this dream again . . . that I was fighting . . . with him . . ."

The girl's eyelids dropped.

Confirming that her pulse was normal, D scooped her up in his arms and, still down on one knee, placed his left hand on the giant's forehead.

The wind whistled sharply. Dynus had just taken a breath.

Opening his eyes wide and finding D, he said, "Hey, good to see you," as if they were just normal people passing on the street.

Staring at Raya cradled in the Hunter's black arms, he asked, "Did it happen again?"

"Yes."

"I wish she'd hurry up and decide whether she's gonna fight me or go back to normal. Every time I really start getting into the battle, this happens. I don't know how much more I can take."

"I bet."

"Don't talk to me in that creepy old guy voice," Dynus said, getting up without too much apparent pain. Perhaps that wasn't so surprising given the fifty million megawatts that'd poured into him every hour for more than two thousand

years.

“Where are you going?”

D walked forward, the area before him a burning, melted depression in the ground thanks to the artificial sun Dynus had just created.

“To where we found Raya the first time. The machinery for bringing out the warrior in her must be buried there.”

“How can you tell?”

“Just a feeling.”

Dynus smiled. Slapping his hands together, he said, “Good, then! Just leave it to me. I’ll dig it right out.”

“Thank you.”

As D nodded, the giant’s form grew hazy. His whole body had begun to vibrate at the molecular level. The ground had been fused to glass, but it crumbled to pieces and swirled into the air in a cloud.

When the two mounted figures arrived, the vast million-square-foot sanctum below the ruins had been left open to the mercy of the white snow.

“This is fantastic—can you believe anything like this still survives?” Serna remarked with admiration. He peered down from the brink of a hole that yawned like the maw of an unholy beast where the ground had been left like a mortar that’d had the bottom worn right out of it.

“My lord, this is remarkable! But then that’s the Nobility’s supercivilization for you, right, professor?” said a monocled man who needed no introduction as he gave the man beside him a pat on the back. Apparently being stuck headfirst into a snow bank hadn’t taught him anything.

Spotting the larger and smaller figures about seventy feet below, the two men tied together the ropes loaded on their respective mounts and started to climb down.

They clung to the mercilessly twisting cord for dear life, and when they finally reached the bottom, Dynus grinned and said, “Glad you could make it.”

He then growled, “But what the hell are you doing here?”

“I have a contract,” Brewer replied pertly as he pulled out the familiar sheet of paper.

“Well, you can walk, you bastard.”

Putting Serna up on his shoulder, Dynus swiftly strode back to the far side of the chamber, where D was waiting. He was surrounded by bizarre equipment—as was Raya. From the colossal cylinders that looked like they might go up the whole seventy feet right down to little bits no bigger than a fingernail, everything was clearly part of a highly complex machine.

More to the center of the device than D, Raya lay on what appeared to be an operating table, although it was unclear whether it was made of metal or some organic substance. It was obvious that the table played an important role in the mechanism from the way a blue light radiated from deep within it.

“Well?”

Serna gave a nod of affirmation in reply to D’s query. This was definitely the chamber used for programming the superwarrior.

“Do you know how to operate it?”

It took the linguist ten seconds to look all around and tilt his head to one side.

“More or less,” said Serna. “However, I can’t be sure if I’m correct or not. After all, this machine belonged to the Nobility.”

“At any rate, let’s give it a try. Start telling us what to do,” D said, ignoring the mechanical uncertainties of the linguist.

Serna began inspecting the equipment. Fortunately, there were no major differences between this and the plans discovered in the ruins of the moving continent. In particular, he was relieved to discover the check sensors that allowed someone to tell at a glance how well the entire machine was functioning were exactly the same.

When the snow was about to turn all of them into white sculptures, Serna gave the thumbs-up.

“This is a spectacular piece of equipment. There isn’t a single thing wrong with

it; every single piece of machinery is operational now, and will probably still be so ten millennia from now."

"I couldn't care less about that. Just get started already," Dynus said as he exhaled on Raya to blow the snow off of her.

"Understood. In principle, this is how it should go. I'll erase the warrior DNA that's been sleeping all along in Raya's genes. This will involve using the machine that awakened her the first time she came here to completely reverse the process."

Serna walked off about six feet to the right to a piece of equipment that appeared to be a computer.

"The data that was used to awaken the warrior memories in Miss Raya has been input into this machine. I'll instruct it to immediately erase the same."

"That'd be wonderful. We're counting on you," said the giant.

"Hold everything," Brewer interjected through chattering teeth. "There's not any chance of you screwing things up and killing her or anything, is there? Because warrior or not, I'll have you know I still have six thousand dalas invested in her."

"You won't be complaining much after you freeze to death." The giant then trained an intense gaze on Serna as he said, "Let's get started."

Serna nodded.

His hand reached out for a protrusion on the computer—but there was a second's pause before he actually touched it. During that time, the strangest thoughts occupied his mind.

Should I be doing this? Should I turn her back into a normal human being? a dark murmur asked. It was the linguist's own ambition-choked voice. I'll never happen across another specimen like this again. A warrior spawned by the Nobility. A being to rival the incredible concentration of energy that dwelt so long in that other castle. Can I allow myself to simply put something like that back to sleep?

Serna threw the switch.

There was no change in the world. No light or sound was created, but both Raya's eyes snapped open at that instant.

"Something's wrong!" Dynus shouted.

It was a second later that Serna's right arm was taken off at the shoulder by a flash of white light.

"D—don't get involved anymore," Dynus said brightly. "I've had fun here the last few days. I'll never have it that good again, I suppose."

"Exactly," said Raya. As she quietly sat up on the operating table, her whole body was painted white by a horizontal gust of snow. "Don't forget me, either. Good-bye, D."

As the girl got off the table, the giant crouched down and braced himself.

"Hey! Stop it! You two don't seriously intend to fight, do you?!"

The two figures streaked up over Brewer's head.

"What in the world?!"

As the flesh trader stood there with eyes bulging, the man in black raced past him, saying, "Take care of him." The voice came from over by the same rope Brewer had climbed down.

When he looked in that direction, Brewer's eyes reflected only a figure in black going up the rope with the speed of a swallow in flight. Giving his head a shake to clear it, he then dashed over to the groaning and blood-spattered linguist.

Up on the ground where everything was hidden by white, D looked to the heavens. Somewhere in the leaden clouds beyond his vision, a gruesome battle to the death was surely taking place. In the black center of his pupils, a white glow burnt its image. It swelled to include all the colors of the rainbow, covering first the entirety of his eyes, and then dominating a whole section of the sky.

"It's over, isn't it?" said a weary voice from the left hand of the long shadow that fell on the ground.

The angry howls of a new wind buffeted the earth. The snow had stopped. A short while after that, white steam enveloped the world—and D. The endless dance of the white flurry had suddenly become a downpour of warm water. And

D alone saw the pair of black specks that fell in the distant wilderness.

With a low whistle, the Hunter summoned his cyborg steed. The hot rain mercilessly pelted a burnt and twisted object that barely retained any resemblance to a human form. Getting off his horse, D went over to Raya.

Perhaps sensing his presence, the girl opened her eyes a crack. They weren't the eyes of a warrior.

"This time . . . I remember," Raya exhaled in a faint breath. "Never wanted . . . to do that, D . . . What in the world . . . was I, after all?"

"A farmer's daughter."

"Really?" the girl said, and she seemed to smile. "I wish we'd had more time . . . together. I wanted to stay with the two of you . . . forever . . ."

All the strength drained from Raya's body.

"Has she passed on?" the giant lying beside her muttered in a low voice.

"Yes."

"I'll be cashing out shortly myself . . . but it felt good to be able to fight with everything I had. What'd she say, anyway?"

Apparently he hadn't heard her.

"She'll be waiting for you," D said.

"Is that a fact? I wonder if I'll be able to tend fields on the other side, too? On second thought, scratch that. I'm sure she'll be waiting for me with armor on." As he looked at D, his bloody lips formed a smile. "Godspeed to you. The three of us will meet again."

A minor spasm ran through his body, and then his gigantic form returned to the earth.

Something pale began dancing through the air again.

D looked at the ruins. Hate-filled dreams that'd lived on for ten thousand years were now shrouded in white.

The linguist’s wound was no longer bleeding a few hours later when the flesh trader reached ground-level with the younger man over his shoulder. What they saw there were two mounds beneath the white mantle, and one of them had a charred log planted behind it.

Returning to the road, the flesh trader ran his gaze down it. Beyond the wildly gusting snow, he got the feeling that he caught a momentary glimpse of a hazy figure in a black coat—and then everything was swallowed by an endless dance of purest white.

POSTSCRIPT

The volume *Dark Nocturne* is the only collection of novellas in the entire Vampire Hunter D series. What's more, aside from the most recent book in Japan—*Throng of Heretics*—it's also the only one that was originally serialized. At the time, Asahi Sonorama (which unfortunately was dissolved last October) was publishing a literary magazine called *Shishi-Oh*, and that's where all the novellas in *Dark Nocturne* were serialized. Up until that point, the Vampire Hunter D series had been exclusively full-length novels. Not that I was dissatisfied with that, but I always had the feeling I'd like to write some stories that wouldn't work in the regular novel length. So that was why when series editor Mr. Ishii suggested, "How about a serialization?" I responded, "Yes, yes, yes!" [*laughs*].

For whatever reason, it seems that authors fall into the category of "novelist," "short story writer," or "can do either." You often hear people say, "He specializes in novels," or, "He can only write short stories." Although it's naturally best to be well-rounded and able to write both long and short works, that doesn't necessarily suit every author's temperament. To be honest, when I was still an amateur, I aspired to be a short story writer. I hadn't written anything novel-length myself, and I was enthralled by short stories by the likes of Ray Bradbury, Jack Finney, Fredric Brown, Richard Matheson, and Theodore Sturgeon—strange and frightening, stylish and intelligent, and beautiful tales, to boot. Even now I think the whole reason I became a writer was to try and write gems like those. However, the gilding tends to come off in the cold, harsh light of reality.

At present, it's extremely difficult for an author to specialize in short stories here in Japan. The field of "otherworldly tales"—horror and science fiction—is particularly brutal. For starters, there are no magazines to carry such stories. Unless it's some kind of special edition, a monthly periodically might carry at most two or three short stories in an issue. And there are times when there are none at all. Their readers like stories that cleave to reality (such as mysteries or romances). At that rate, it would take years to get enough short stories for an anthology, and even if you got such a volume printed, the number actually sold

would be surprisingly low. There are no Bradburys in Japan.

Fortunately, I had the ability to write novels (whether I write them well or not is another matter). And I've even managed to pull off some short stories. (Though there's little call for them. The reason for that should be clear by now). According to a more experienced writer, "A novelist is an artist working in oils. The short story writer is a watercolor artist. Although an artist who uses oil paints can quickly adjust to using watercolors, the watercolor specialist can't necessarily make an oil painting." I think there may be some truth to that.

It would give me great pleasure to someday show my English readers a collection of my short stories. I wonder if you'd be interested in a tale that combines Japanese swordplay and specters?

Hideyuki Kikuchi November 5, 2007

While watching *Dracula's Daughter*

And now, a preview of the next book in the
Vampire Hunter D series

Vampire Hunter D

Volume II

Pale Fallen Angels Part One

Written by
Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrations by
Yoshitaka Amano

English translation by
Kevin Leahy

Coming in October 2008
from Dark Horse Books and Digital Manga Publishing

STRANGE TRAVELING COMPANIONS

CHAPTER 1

I

Though the moonlight should've been entirely impartial, that road alone seemed to stand out like a blue snake—it was surrounded by darkness. The leaves rustled restlessly. The wind was picking up.

The road was really a highway. A relatively high number of people and vehicles traveled it by day, but with the coming of night, it became a kingdom of the weird prowled by such famed creatures of the western Frontier as shape-shifting humanoids and matter-changing bugs.

Apparently an unfortunate traveler had invaded their domain tonight. Five or six bizarre silhouettes surrounded a tall figure in front of a carriage way station that sat by the side of the highway. The way station contained bolt-firing pistols, short spears, and longswords that might be used in an emergency, but the figure showed no sign of taking them in hand as he remained soaking in the hungry gazes of eyes aglow with a green phosphorescence.

What seemed to keep the fiendish forms from immediately pouncing on the man was the cruelty the Nobility had fostered in their creations—the desire to keep their prey in terror until the moment of its death. But just then, the voice of the darkness turned that theory on its head as the man asked, "Why do you not come for me?"

By the sound of it, it wasn't the monsters who were waiting, but rather the traveler.

"Then I shall have to make it easier for you to approach. Come!"

With that last word, another light took hold in the darkness: streaking glows of crimson. At that instant, shadowy forms sprang at him from either side. One was an altered insect. Resembling a giant preying mantis, its body began to transform into something denser in midair, from something organic to inorganic—to steel.

The light of the moon shot up from below. A body that was intended to repel any kind of attack split like a rotten vegetable, spraying an oily substance as it fell to the ground.

The bloodsucking moth-man who'd simultaneously pounced from the opposite side had phosphorescent flecks of gold flying from his wings as he was ripped right down the center. The scythe-like claws of the former and blood-siphoning proboscis of the latter had never managed to strike home.

"Come!"

In response to the traveler's second invitation, a thunder beast firmly planted all six of its paws on the ground as it turned its helmet-like head to the heavens.

Pale bolts of lightning struck the figure. The air was ionized, and white smoke curled from the earth. Again and again lightning struck the man.

The figure raised his right hand. In it, he grasped a black blade with an elegant curve. The sword had a sheen unlike any weapon local travelers, soldiers, or fighting men would ever carry, and from the instant he pulled it out till he held it aloft, it absorbed the lightning continuously. And even after he drove it deep into the thunder beast's chest, the creature likely never knew what had happened. Lightning crackled around the blade and, as if reading its wielder's mind, leapt from its tip to the thunder beast's face.

Spasms gripped the monster. Using electrical discharge in the air rather than from its own body to electrocute its opponents, the creature didn't actually have any defense of its own against electricity.

With a pale glow still clinging to the sword, the man raised it, and then brought it down in a stroke. Though his arms already seemed fully extended, the blade that split the thunder beast's head in two reached a foot further than it should have.

"Two to go—I wish I could tell you to attack me, but the one I've been waiting for has come. Away with you!"

And with that command from the figure, the surviving creatures that'd been frozen in place as if awaiting their fate each gave a low growl and immediately vanished into the darkness to either side of the road. They were so incredibly fast

that it almost looked as if they'd teleported away.

Flicking the gore from his blade with a single shake, the man slowly looked over his shoulder. At the far end of the highway that ran down from the north, the silhouette of a horse and rider had just come into view. Though the moonlight was bluish, the man on the steed seemed to be garbed in a hue far deeper than the darkness. Beneath his wide-brimmed traveler's hat, a pair of oddly glowing eyes gazed at the figure.

Stepping over the thunder beast corpse that lay at his feet, the man moved forward. A blue domain came into being in the middle of the darkness–at least, that was how it seemed. For the man was covered from the shoulders down by a cape the color of the deepest sea. The click that came from the vicinity of his hip was apparently his blade being returned to its sheath.

"Balazs?" the black rider asked from his mount's back.

"Indeed. How like the greatest Hunter of this day and age to be so punctual," the man said, although he didn't seem to consult a watch.

However, the rider had indeed appeared exactly at the appointed time.

"Though I must say," the man continued, "my body trembled the instant you approached. Otherwise I never would've let those last two creatures get away."

The rider had approached without the man on the ground even noticing his presence until the last moment.

"From the time I turned onto the highway, you should've been able to detect me. I wasn't really trying to go unnoticed," said the black rider.

From that remark, the man on the ground was made to be a liar even though he knew all along who he was dealing with—though it appeared he'd actually been paying a compliment to the rider.

Which of them was right?

"State your business," said the figure in black.

"Will you not dismount at least? I have the most wonderful liquor."

There was no reply.

Not seeming to take any particular offense, the man continued, “Then I shall tell you. I wish you to see me to the village of Krauhausen.”

The village was on the far edge of the Frontier—a hundred and twenty miles to the west. And it really was the edge, with an ominous chain of mountains miles high towering just beyond it.

“You’re fully capable of going alone,” said the rider.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” the figure in blue responded.

His hair was golden and flowing, and his eyes were ultramarine—he possessed great beauty. The moonlight only added to his air of mystery, until it seemed that everything surrounding him would be reduced to a blur. Everything save one person—the rider still up in the saddle.

“There is someone in the village who wouldn’t particularly welcome my arrival. As soon as I approach, I’m sure I shall be greeted with violence. Honestly, I don’t believe I can make it on my own. I need your help, D.”

“Tell me why you want me to accompany you. And don’t say it’s because you’re not confident in your own abilities.”

“One reason should already be clear to you. The other I cannot say. But the one who awaits me in the village is a Noble. I want you to destroy him. And that will have to suffice for now.”

D said nothing as he gazed at his strange would-be employer. While it was certainly understandable that someone might want him to dispose of a Noble, refusing to disclose the reason was a grave breach of protocol. From the very start, D’s attitude had been somewhat unusual. He turned his back.

“Please wait,” the figure in blue—Balazs—called out. “I had no desire to expose the shameful actions of my own parents, but it’s unavoidable. The name of the Noble who waits in Krauhausen is Vlad Balazs. He’s my father.”

The horse wheeled around once more.

“Do not ask me why I would have you execute my father,” Balazs said in a hard tone. “I must see to it that he is destroyed. That is my sole purpose. I can’t allow

my power to be whittled away by needless opposition. Although it may be unheard of for a Vampire Hunter to enter the employ of a Noble, I beg you to break with tradition. Will you not accept this assignment?”

There was no sound—even D couldn’t help but fall silent at this explanation. For a vampire to seek assistance from someone whose very purpose was to destroy them, and furthermore to have as the target one’s own parent was not only completely unheard of, but it was truly bizarre. What sort of thoughts flitted through the mind of the young man of unearthly beauty?

Presently, D replied, “Okay.”

He spoke from horseback to the other warrior.

“Many thanks,” said the man clad in blue. “I haven’t been out of my castle much. I thought it would be best to leave everything to your judgment for the duration of our journey.”

“Fine.”

“Splendid! Now, for your compensation—”

The figure he mentioned was exactly a hundred times the accepted rate.

“Here’s an advance.”

Pulling a small bag out of his cape, he tossed it to D.

Catching it in his left hand, D didn’t even look inside before saying, “Okay.”

The coins were a precious metal worth a hundred times their weight in gold.

“—While you’re with me, I won’t allow you to feed on humans. If you should happen to break this condition, I will destroy you on the spot.”

“Understood,” Balazs said flatly. Somehow, his voiced resembled that of the man in black. “Oh, I must be forgetting my manners not to have introduced myself properly. I am Byron Balazs, son of Vlad, the regulator of the western Frontier.”

Viewed objectively, this really was an odd journey—although the term “earth-shattering” might’ve been more apropos. The employer traveling with the Vampire Hunter was one of the very bloodsucking Nobles he was supposed to destroy. Needless to say, Balazs could act only by night. This was the reason the baron said should be apparent to D. By day, he rode in a blue carriage drawn by a team of four horses. The vehicle had been parked off in a nearby forest when he fought the monstrous creatures. Apparently the four cyborg horses had been told to comply with D’s commands, and they followed him meekly.

However, it was plain for all to see that the vehicle belonged to the Nobility. As they went down the road by day, travelers and pedestrians stopped in their tracks with their eyes bugged. Many got off the road and hid. Some even readied their weapons. What’s more, the young man who seemed to be acting as a guide possessed a heavenly beauty that no human could hope to equal no matter how they tried. It was perfectly natural that the same thought should pop into the heads of everyone along the road.

There goes a Noble and their servant.

There were some who served the Nobility that were still living, breathing humans. In many cases, it was someone whose blood they’d stopped drinking just before the person was about to join their ranks—people who’d dropped off into a kind of hypnotic state highly open to suggestion. However, there were also those who retained their senses and still swore fealty from the bottom of their hearts—in a word, “traitors.” D must’ve appeared to be one of the latter. But the people who thought that naturally had their expressions tinged with perplexity due to D’s incredibly good looks.

Ordinarily, such a pair would travel back roads by day where they wouldn’t draw much attention and take to the highway by night. Or else they’d sleep somewhere deep in the woods by day and move solely in darkness. If one were to follow the Nobility’s natural disposition, the latter made more sense. However, D went right down the highway while the sun was shining, and stopped at night.

“Why don’t we go when it’s dark?” the baron asked on the third evening of their journey.

“Are you in a hurry?”

“No.”

“Are you bored?”

“No,” Balazs replied once more.

Undoubtedly the interior of the baron’s carriage was furnished with amusements unimaginable by D. Although the Nobility’s scientific prowess may not have unraveled the secrets of time, it had essentially mastered matters of space.

“In that case, deal with it.”

“You’re in charge. I don’t mean to complain, but considering both our physiologies, wouldn’t it be far less taxing for us to travel by night? It would also be that much easier for you to keep tabs on me.”

Gently raising the brim of his traveler’s hat, D looked at the baron.

Transfixed by that gaze, the vampiric Noble shuddered at the hue of the eyes that threatened to suck him in.

“Do you want me to keep tabs on you?” asked the Hunter.

A thin smile seemed to skim the baron’s lips.

“No.”

“I don’t want you to get the impression I trust you,” D added in a voice like ice. “My job is getting you to the village of Krauhausen. And if I were a foe who knew you were coming, I’d certainly choose to attack you by daylight.”

“I see. That makes perfect sense,” the baron remarked with a gorgeous grin. Though beautiful, his smile also bordered on ghastly. “Although you may not trust me, I have consummate faith in you, Vampire Hunter ‘D.’”

And saying that, he added, “However—”

Just then, the creak of what sounded like wooden wheels could be heard to the north of the woods where they were—coming from the highway. The sound of engines then came in due course—a number of them.

“There are five, counting the carriage,” said the baron. “They’re more than a

half mile from here.”

Though the wheels and the engines surely raised quite a din, only the ears of a Noble would be able to isolate each individual sound over such a distance.

“Would you mind if I went?” the baron asked, having already risen to his feet.

“Do as you like,” D replied.

Although he knew there were no homes in the area before he ever spoke, in light of the powers the Nobility possessed, it would be hard not to consider the Hunter’s response indifferent or even irresponsible.

Once the baron’s blue cape had vanished into the darkness, D pushed his hat down over his eyes and sat back against the roots of a massive tree to sleep.

Racing madly down the road was a white carriage drawn by a pair of horses. It was so elegantly crafted, it was apparent at a glance that it belonged to the Nobility—and up in the driver’s seat, a young man was madly working a whip. Yet his visage was as expressionless as a stark white Noh mask, and he didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow at the sound of gasoline-powered car engines now less than fifty yards behind him.

As the upright collar of the man’s coat was knocked down by the force of the wind, the neck that was left exposed had a pair of swollen and discolored wounds at the nape—punctures undoubtedly left there by fangs. Neither human nor Noble, he was merely a puppet who moved at the commands of the master who’d given him the kiss of the Nobility—a Cesare.

Although he’d avoided the post towns, he was spotted by a bunch of rustic youths who’d been out playing too long on the back roads, and they decided to give chase. But whether that troubled the driver’s numbed brain or not was difficult to determine.

At that moment, a cold voice linked the youth to the vehicle like a thread.

“Our foes are coming. What in blazes are you doing?!”

With veritable thunder echoing from the wagon wheels, the comment still rang in the young man’s head as if it had been whispered right into his ear.

“It’s beyond my power to make them go any faster,” he replied, not seeming particularly agitated. “Mistress, I think perhaps you might—”

“Do you think I would actually sit up there next to a servant and work the reins?” the voice said softly, but she quickly laughed, “Oh, very well. Move over!”

Offering no protests, the young man slid to the right, at which point the roof of the carriage opened smoothly and a figure of pure white appeared in the void. Moonlight gave her the luster of silver.

As the figure moved into the position the driver had previously occupied, the young man reeled backward at the same time.

The figure in white—clearly female from the sound of her voice—put one hand to the wound on his neck that had left his head connected by a narrow strip of skin. She was stanching the flow of blood.

Turning her golden brown eyes in a loving glance at the youth who’d been killed instantly, she said, “Now that I no longer have you, I shall have no choice but to do it myself. Hmm . . . I wonder where I shall find my next servant?”

As she pursed her lips, a gunshot rang out behind her. One of her pursuers had fired a conventional rifle. As if on cue, a number of sparks shot from various points on the carriage.

Without warning, the carriage tilted to the right—the figure in white had suddenly tugged the reins to turn in that direction. Though the horses managed the turn, it proved too much for the vehicle. Bolts in the coupler connecting the horses to the carriage blew out automatically, setting the animals free.

The vehicle toppled over. Wagon wheels churned up dust and threw grass from the plains everywhere. Shaking the earth, the vehicle rolled a second time and a third before settling down.

Less than five seconds later, a quartet of lights came gliding down the highway. Cutting their engines about fifteen feet shy of the carriage, the young men got out of their low-slung motorcars armed with every imaginable weapon.

Their vehicles hardly deserved to be called cars. The bodies were rough frames from easily workable materials like wood and light alloys that’d then been fitted with tires and an engine—in other words, go-karts. Each of them looked well-

used, with their engine compartments pitch black with soot.

“You figure they’re dead?” asked one of the young men.

“No chance. We’re dealing with the Nobility here. We can’t afford to let our guard down.”

“If we can catch it instead of killing it, it could be more useful later. We could bring it to some research center in the Capital, and I hear they’d pay a fortune for it.”

Compared to other areas, the western Frontier had been relatively free of trouble with the Nobility after their decline. Therefore, it was understandable that as generations passed, there were more and more people who didn’t know how fearsome the Nobles truly were. However, these young men didn’t realize that when actually faced with one, their earlier words would count for nothing.

Driven purely by a lust for fame and wealth, the young men walked right over to death’s door.

The door opened.

With the creak of hinges, the upward-facing carriage door had slowly swung in an arc. From it, something like a white glow popped up, then glided down to stand beside the carriage, where it resolved into a young woman who wore a white dress and had flowing black tresses. She had neat little eyebrows like willow leaves, eyes as dark as a holy night, and a nose and lips that were beautifully delicate, with every tiny wrinkle and crease of the latter so sharp they’d burn themselves into the retinas of all who saw them. The girl’s entire body was also shrouded in white phosphorescence. No, you could actually go so far as to call it a white flame.

The unearthly aura that welled from her rooted the recklessly courageous young men.

One stepped forward with a longsword in hand. He was their leader, and by far the fiercest of the bunch.

It’s just a damn Noble, he told himself, but there was nothing he could do about the tremble in his legs. As if to shake it off, he gave a shout of, “Take that!” and drove his blade into the woman.

They had heard about the Nobility's immortal nature from their mothers and fathers. Although stabbing such a creature anywhere but through the heart wouldn't destroy it, it could still prove fairly effective. They would try and grab her while she was still wincing from being struck in the belly—that's what the leader thought.

Not moving a muscle, the woman took the blade through her svelte abdomen.

"Holy shit!" the young man screamed as he stumbled forward.

Feeling no contact, no physical resistance whatsoever, the longsword sank into the young woman's form up to the hilt, and then the young man himself slipped right through her body.

"Whatever are you doing?"

Slamming nose-first into the ground, the young man snorted angrily but quickly got up again as her voice resounded behind him with naked scorn. He turned around in shock.

The woman's form had vanished abruptly, but she now stood about ten feet in front of his compatriots, who'd also turned the same way. In her left hand she cradled the young man whose head dangled back on the thin strip of skin connecting it to his neck—her driver. Her right hand kept his gaping neck wound covered all the while.

"You—you stupid bitch!"

"Come to me. This time, I shall be the real thing," she told them, her voice so refreshingly clear, it seemed as if the moon above them had spoken.

Ignorant of what lay behind that tone, all the young men aside from the leader shouldered their rifles. Flames and the booming report of gunfire rocked the night air. Due to the fact that their ammunition used far more gunpowder than necessary, the heavy rifles kicked their barrels up nearly ninety degrees.

But what shook horribly under the impact of the bullets was the driver's corpse. Even though the young men realized she was using him as a shield, it still looked to them almost as if he'd stepped in front of the gunfire of his own accord. For a second they were blasted by a gale of sheer terror, and their fingers ceased pulling the triggers.

“I desire a substitute,” said the voice of the unseen girl. It was as if the headless corpse had spoken. “One of you—for the rest I have no use.”

A white blur rose straight up from the corpse’s neck. The five fingers that’d capped the wound had been taken away.

But something sparkled brilliantly in the moonlight as it rose in a geyser. As the youths watched, it spread in midair, billowing against them like black gossamer and staining their bodies with something dark. Blood. The blood of the driver.

There was no sense protesting that the heart pumping his blood should’ve already stopped when the only possible explanation was that it continued working even though his head had been almost completely taken off.

Dyed black, the young men stood paralyzed with disbelief for a while, but each soon gave a dying scream and fell to the ground. The gore that’d rained down on them was no ordinary blood. As a result of coming into contact with the girl’s hand, it had been transformed into a drug of sorts that, on entering the human body, caused a chemical reaction with their own blood that in turn formed an unknown but virulent poison. Even their flesh and bones were dissolving.

Ironically, the only one spared was the first one whose skin had come into contact with the black blood. As his friends’ faces and limbs collapsed into piles of offal, the leader could only stare in utter shock.

“Come to me,” said the girl, beckoning to him with her hand. Now no longer necessary, the corpse of her driver had been discarded at her feet.

It was the leader’s good fortune that the girl’s beckoning gesture was done half in jest—she had put no hypnotic power behind it. He still had a means of escape. Pushing the longsword he had in his hand against his neck, he slashed through the carotid artery before the woman’s voice or the gleam of her eyes could reach him.

“Of all the nerve,” the girl said, her voice carrying the first signs of loathing and agitation. “He won’t make much of a servant like that. Now where am I supposed to find another one? But wait—there may be a chance if he’s not completely dead yet!”

As if she’d just had a wonderful idea, the girl raced gaily to the prone form of

the leader. So long as he hadn't died, it would be possible to give him "the kiss of the Nobility" and transform him into one of the living dead. It would be easy enough to get him to do the trivial duties she had for him.

Easily taking away the longsword he gripped, she grabbed the leader by the scruff of the neck and flipped him over. At the time, she didn't notice the spokes from the broken wagon wheel lying beside him.

The leader opened his eyes a crack.

"How splendid! I hope you shall enjoy serving me."

Her pale and lovely visage slowly moved closer to the nape of his neck, and a heartbeat later, an unearthly scream gushed from the girl's mouth. She was going to suck the blood from a half-dead man who could offer no resistance. But in the end, it was that simple act that'd invited her to drop her guard.

Like a curse on the swell of bosom in her white dress, the wooden spokes that'd supported the rim of the wheel were stuck through the middle of her chest. In his dying seconds, the group's leader had wrung one last bit of strength from himself to drive the jagged chunk of wood into the girl's torso. Though he ceased breathing almost immediately, he must've been satisfied by her screams, because in death his face wore an unsettling grin.

"You bastard! You rotten bastard!" the girl bellowed as she reached for the stake in her chest.

To be perfectly honest, her wound wasn't that deep. The young man's strength had been spent. And yet the girl couldn't pull it out.

But take a closer look at it. The wheel had lost its outer rim, and most of the wooden spokes had broken off the hub, but a pair was still left sticking out from either side, forming the shape of a cross. A cross-shaped stake.

White smoke poured from the hand that'd grabbed hold of it, and her skin had melted away.

Unable to say a word, she was writhing when her body was abruptly turned over to face upward. Before her surprise could even register, the stake was pulled out.

“Who are you—?” the girl asked. Apparently some of the cross’s effect still remained, as she was barely able to catch her breath.

“I am Baron Byron Balazs,” the figure in the blue cape said, snapping the stake in two and hurling the pieces far away. “What are you doing out here?”

Putting one hand to her chest, where a crimson rose had blossomed, the girl let out an easy breath. She’d recognized him as one of her kind.

Curtsying respectfully, she said, “I am Miska, granddaughter of Duke Cornelius Drake, director of the Southern Frontier Control Committee. And I have certain business that takes me to the village of Krauhausen.”

“What are the odds?” the baron muttered, and the girl seemed to read something in his expression.

“Could it be that you’re headed there as well? If you don’t mind, might I travel in your company?” she asked in a voice that tugged at him with dependency.

“That may prove problematic,” the baron said noncommittally. He wasn’t exactly traveling alone.

“I can’t, then?”

Despair spread across her face like the legs of a black spider, but at that point the girl turned with a start. She’d just noticed that the baron was staring at something.

About thirty feet away, D stood beside a colossal bole.

“And who is this?” the girl—Miska—asked in spite of herself.

His sordid raiment was such a mismatch for his elegant features, she couldn’t help but ask. He looked like nothing shy of a Noble.

“This is my trusted escort. He’s known as D.” And after introducing him, the baron asked, “Well?”

He was referring to the matter of Miska.

“D? It can’t be,” the girl said before the man could respond, shock reshaping her countenance. “Vampire Hunter ‘D’—how many times I’ve heard that name. He’s our sworn foe!”

“He’s traveling with me. My partner, so to speak.”

At the baron’s words, Miska’s expression wavered.

“Is he your servant, then?”

“Regretfully, I haven’t laid a finger on him. As I mentioned, he’s accompanying me on my journey to the village of Krauhausen to keep me safe.”

“Impossible,” Miska groaned as she put her fist to her mouth. “A Noble and a Hunter would never travel together . . . I simply can’t believe it!”

“Regarding what I just asked you—what do you say?” the baron inquired.

“She’ll only be in the way,” said D. “We’ll do what we can for her. But if you’re taking care of her and find you’re unable to keep yourself safe, I don’t want to hear any complaints.”

“Understood,” the baron said with a firm nod.

“You can see how it is,” he told Miska. “I’m sorry, but we’ll have no choice but to part company with you. You would do well to try to reach some remote locale before dawn. You’d best go now.”

“Do you mean to tell me you, a Noble, answer to a lowly dhampir?” Miska said in a resolute tone. Glaring at D with wildly blazing eyes all the while, she added, “In that case, allow me to ask something of you. I should like you to see me to a safe location.”

Though she made this request without any visible concern, it left the baron in a difficult position. As a Noble, he couldn’t very well leave a lady in distress. However, he had a greater purpose, and in order to achieve his ends, D would prove indispensable.

Miska gazed at the baron with a rather angry look.

“Very well, we shall bring you now to a safe area,” he said.

The vitality returned to Miska’s expression—it was like the stars lighting up the night sky. That’s what it was to be a Noble.

“However, this is only for tonight,” the baron added. “If I may speak candidly, the journey we’re on is extremely dangerous. Even with this Hunter along for

protection, you would still probably be safer traveling alone. I certainly would never leave you to fend for yourself otherwise. I just want you to understand that."

"Understood," Miska said curtly.

The baron's face clouded at the reaction, though it was exactly what he'd expected.

"I realize your position and your terrible plight," the girl continued. "However, this is unforgivable. If you abandon a frail woman simply because it suits your own convenience, the rest of the Nobility shall surely point at you and jeer till the end of time."

The baron fell silent. Though he'd expected a remark like this, he found her words had far more power over him than he ever would've dreamt possible. For a few seconds, his thoughts made him want to retch blood.

"We can accompany you for tonight alone. If the code of the Nobility decrees that I'm to be an object of scorn for the rest of my days, then I shall resign myself to that fate."

Once more, Miska's expression changed.

III

After that, the group raced along for about an hour until an especially deep and black forest came into view.

Reattaching the steeds to Miska's carriage and putting her inside it, the baron then told her, "Once the dawn comes, we must take our leave."

"Thank you ever so much for going so far out of your way on my account," Miska replied as if she was reading a prepared statement, and then her carriage sank into the abyss of silence.

Wearing a bitter grin, the baron walked over to D, who stood by Balazs's carriage.

“Be they Noble or human, someone must look out for women and children,” the baron remarked.

“That girl killed four young men,” said D.

“Surely that was their fault.”

“I’m not blaming her. Even a Noble has a right to defend herself. But if young Nobles had been doing the same thing, you’d certainly have been capable of turning a blind eye..”

“Are you certain we can’t bring her with us?”

“She could be an assassin,” the Hunter told him.

“Impossible!”

“There’s no way to be sure. In this world, anything can happen.”

“True enough.”

“Did you ask her why she was going to Krauhausen?”

“No,” the baron replied with a shake of his head. “Hmm, I suppose that is too much of a coincidence. I imagine going our separate ways truly is the best solution.”

But no sooner had he made peace with the idea than there was the creak of hinges. The door to Miska’s carriage opened, and a white glow stepped down. It was Miska. Without even glancing at the pair, she headed toward the highway with a gait that made it seem like she was swimming.

“What’s that all about?” the baron asked, squinting his eyes.

“Stay here,” D told him before heading off after the glowing Miska.

Though she wasn’t traveling all that quickly and he soon caught up, it almost looked as if a wind whipped up by D drove her forward as she glided along thirty feet ahead of him like some soap bubble he was chasing.

In a corner of the forest so overgrown even the moonlight never reached it, she vanished abruptly.

D halted. Though it was so pitch black here most people wouldn’t see their own hand in front of their face, his eyes saw the world as if it were in broad

daylight.

“I see I was successful in my bid to lure you out, interloper,” Miska’s voice said from nowhere in particular. “I’m quite sure the only reason that gentleman has treated me so poorly is because you’ve been filling him with foolish notions. There’s no other reason why any upstanding Noble would leave a lady behind in her hour of need. You lowly half-blood impostor—here I’ll send you to your maker!”

“So, you’re a lady in distress?” D asked softly. “A woman who would hunt a Hunter—I’m sure you must be terribly frail.”

“Silence!”

And as if in response to her furious roar—a human figure suddenly glowed just ahead of D. It was Miska. Without even seeming to move her feet, she closed on D.

“Interesting,” someone said. It wasn’t D, but rather a hoarse voice from the vicinity of his left hip.

D’s left hand went into action.

Something knifed through the wind and pierced the trees. There was a woman’s gasp, and then it quickly became quiet again. And at the same time, the glowing Miska faded.

Bounding to that spot without making a sound, D took a look at the plain wooden stake stuck in the tree trunk before he spun around. Ahead of him, a black fog had billowed up silently. D’s kicking off the ground and the fog’s enveloping him were almost simultaneous. And it was a few seconds later that a cry of pain arose from the bushes about fifteen feet away.

“You did a wonderful job of seeing through my little deception, but you can’t stop the fog of death. I should’ve expected as much from Vampire Hunter ‘D.’ My carelessness has simply made more work for me,” said the figure in white who’d appeared from thin air—Miska.

Apparently she’d taken D seeing through her illusion into account all along.

“When my blood enters your body, it’ll become poison. Even a Noble can be

immobilized for three days by it. But that's nothing compared to what it'll do to a miserable dhampir."

As her feet pattered across the grass to bring her to where D had landed, her right hand clutched an imposing foot-long knife—although it was anyone's guess where she'd kept it hidden up until now.

As expected, D fell flat on his back among the roots of the tree.

"I'm sure the baron will be rather cross with me, but I'm prepared to accept that."

The girl raised her knife, and then swung it down. But it was stopped cold in midair.

"It can't be!"

As Miska's eyes bulged in astonishment, the youth far more lovely than her slowly got back on his feet.

"So, are you the real thing?" D asked.

"Why didn't my fog of blood harm you? Do you mean to tell me you're indestructible?"

Of course, Miska had no way of knowing that a faint snicker issued from the part of his left hand that came into contact with her wrist, holding back the deadly blow.

"Kill me," Miska groaned. Both her lips and her voice quaked. Her spell had been broken by a human/Noble half-breed. For a Noble like Miska, the humiliation of that was a fate worse than death.

The young man wasn't the sort of person to pardon anyone who'd made an attempt on his life. Miska would meet her fate here.

D's right hand flashed out. His longsword had shot up above his head.

The shadowy figures that'd just leapt down from the tree were bisected before they could cry out, leaving a total of six pieces.

"It's not over yet," Miska said as she watched the dark forms. Shockingly enough, it looked like she was enjoying herself.

D also realized it wasn't over. Even before the half dozen pieces of the bisected figures sluggishly got up again, he knew there was something wrong from the unusual feel of his blade as it'd gone through them.

"It would appear you have someone else to take care of before you deal with me," Miska said, her eyes turning to the half dozen pieces.

The figures didn't move. Though they'd returned to life, they'd already tasted D's blade once. But the right hand of each glistened with the cutting edge of a weapon.

Still facing them, D raised his left hand, and then something whistled through the air. At the same time, the shadowy figures pounced on him. D's blade struck down only the first figure. The upper and lower halves of the remainder were flying through the air, but they then fell to the ground like puppets that'd had their strings cut.

The leaves trembled, shaking off the moonlight. Seconds earlier, D apparently hadn't missed the groan up in the tree. The rough wooden needle had found its mark.

"Done playing with your dolls?" D asked as he looked up.

Miska knit her brow. She didn't understand what D meant.

From the treetop, a mournful voice flowed out, saying, "It figures he'd only hire the best as an escort—you're the first person to ever find me while I was hidden."

"So, you're a puppet master?" said D.

"Aye. Folks call me 'Mario the Puppeteer.' Keep in mind; the ones I just threw at you were merely a test. I wonder whether you'll be able to spot the puppets I use next time," the voice said, laughing as if its pain were already forgotten.

Once more an arrow of light flew from D's right hand, and the stand of trees swayed in response.

"We'll meet again, dashing Hunter! Perhaps next time it'll be in the depths of hell," the same voice called from the grove to D's rear, then the treetops rustled noisily once before it became quiet again.

D used his hand to bat away what was falling in front of him.

Miska also seemed to notice it, and she said, “Whatever could these strings be for?”

She then looked quickly at the figures lying at her feet and nodded knowingly to herself.

“Say,” she called out to D, but then she noticed something that completely altered her expression. D still had a firm grip on her right wrist. One had to wonder how he’d managed to work his sword or hurl the wooden needles under the circumstances.

Their eyes met. His were still ice, unchanged from when he’d told her he would dispose of her.

“Do you still intend to do something . . . to me?” Miska said, backing away a step.

Terror shot through her from the very top of her head down to the tips of her toes. The Hunter had just released her, and she knew what that had to mean.

Glittering, D’s blade went into motion.

And then—

“Wait!”

The voice was that of Baron Balazs. Crossing the grass, he said, “I came out here thinking something like this might’ve happened. Stop, D! I won’t allow you to lay a hand on this girl.”

“She tried to kill me.”

D’s reply left the baron at a loss for words. Noticing the black shapes lying at his feet, he’d thought that was what had attacked them.

Quickly turning to Miska, the baron said, “That was a foolish thing to do—you must never do so again.”

Miska lowered her eyes at his harsh tone.

D stepped forward.

Somewhat flustered, the baron told him, “Stop it! Dawn will be here soon.

Then we part company. Just let her be."

"Out of my way," D replied.

"I'm your employer."

"And what have you employed me for? If you don't have me around, you'll be in danger. She was well aware of that."

"This time, I must ask you to restrain yourself," the baron said coolly. "Besides, as my guard, you committed a major blunder."

"What blunder?"

"I was attacked just now. See for yourself."

The left side of his cape was thrown back, revealing a jagged wound to his shoulder. Due to the incredible recuperative powers of the Nobility, the actual wound had half closed already, but the clothing over it was damp and red.

"They struck at the same time. They must've waited for you to leave my side. And as my guard, your failure to realize that was an obvious mistake."

Although the Nobleman may have been exaggerating a bit, D's sword returned to its sheath.

"There won't be a second time," the Hunter stated, but it was unclear if his remark was directed at Miska or the baron. But the young Noblewoman's shoulders still dropped in relief.

"We're going back now," D told him.

The baron was captivated by a strange thought, and he followed the Hunter naturally enough. Although he'd agreed to comply with D's instructions for the duration of the journey, a Noble ordinarily would probably never accept such an arrangement, particularly when it involved an employee whose way of speaking and general bearing were light years away from where they should be. Yet he wasn't at all angry. In fact, he got the impression he could trust the Hunter, and that this was the safest thing to do.

Of course, dhampirs had some Noble blood in them. The empathy that sprang from that connection was actually the biggest reason the Nobility detested dhampirs. A human being with the same regal blood they possessed? Due to

these feelings, the highest honor a dhampir could receive was to be treated as a Noble, but for a Noble, the very lowest form of employment was exterminating dhampirs.

At a certain Noble's mansion in the southern Frontier district, a "head market" was held once a year in imitation of the open-air markets in human cities. Of all the countless severed heads on exhibit there from humans and beasts, the cheapest of all were those of dhampirs—which were sold by the mound. Of course, you could say such excessive contempt only served to betray the Nobility's mixed feelings about dhampirs.

And the baron probably wasn't exempt from those emotions. Though he was indispensable where this trip was concerned, taking orders from D the dhampir had to be more than a little humbling to his psyche. Miska's actions were most likely prompted by this unease as well. And yet, the Noble couldn't help but wonder if the young man wasn't something far greater than even he could imagine. The baron had to consciously push back this thought when it suddenly popped into his mind.

"What was your attacker like?" D asked as they were walking.

"Someone made up of flowers."

"Flowers?"

Not long after D had gone off in pursuit of Miska, a golden pollen-like dust had blown in on the wind. Immediately holding his breath, the baron had seen a figure in all the colors of the rainbow standing just beyond the eddying swirls of yellow. The cape that shrouded the tall figure had spread wide. The reason he seemed to have every imaginable hue was because the body beneath that cape was covered with lovely flower petals. The dust—or pollen—flew from one of those varieties.

The baron had taken cover behind his carriage. A split second later, more madness assailed him from above. He'd narrowly escaped, though his shoulder was rent wide in the process. The only thing that'd allowed him to get off so lightly was the superhuman reflexes he possessed as a member of the Nobility. He'd quickly looked up to the sky, but even with the lyncean eyes of a Noble, he hadn't been able to discern any more than a shadowy winged figure flying off to

the south at incredible speed, and the multicolored assassin had also vanished.

There had been two foes.

“Do you know them?” asked the baron.

“The flower character? Yes.”

“Oh, really?”

“He’s known as ‘Crimson Stitchwort,’ and he’s a famous Vampire Hunter in the eastern sectors. Mario, who I ran into, is one of the top-three out west. It would seem you’ve got every half-decent Hunter on the Frontier out to get you.”

“Do you suppose I have someone spooked?”

“Only you’d know that.”

The baron smiled thinly, but didn’t say another word all the way back to camp.

To be continued in

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME II

PALE FALLEN ANGELS PART ONE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in Chiba, Japan in 1949. He attended the prestigious Aoyama University and wrote his first novel, *Demon City Shinjuku,* in 1982. Over the past two decades, Kikuchi has written numerous horror novels, and is one of Japan's leading horror masters, working in the tradition of occidental horror writers like Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, H. P. Lovecraft, and Stephen King. As of 2004, there are seventeen novels in his hugely popular ongoing Vampire Hunter D series. Many live-action and anime movies of the 1980s and 1990s have been based on Kikuchi's novels.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Yoshitaka Amano was born in Shizuoka, Japan. He is well known as a manga and anime artist, and is the famed designer for the Final Fantasy game series. Amano took part in designing characters for many of Tatsunoko Productions' greatest cartoons, including *Gatchaman* (released in the U.S. as *G-Force* and *Battle of the Planets*). Amano became a freelancer at the age of thirty and has collaborated with numerous writers, creating nearly twenty illustrated books that have sold millions of copies. Since the late 1990s Amano has worked with several American comics publishers, including DC Comics on the illustrated Sandman novel *Sandman: The Dream Hunters* with Neil Gaiman, and for Marvel Comics on *Elektra and Wolverine: The Redeemer* with best-selling author Greg Rucka.